

LIVELIHOOD

WILFRID WILSON GIBSON



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LIVELIHOOD



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TORONTO

LIVELIHOOD

DRAMATIC REVERIES

BY

WILFRID WILSON GIBSON

AUTHOR OF "DAILY BREAD," "BORDERLANDS AND
THOROUGHFARES," "BATTLE AND OTHER POEMS," ETC.

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no. 1.

TO AUDREY

Audrey, these men and women I have known
I have brought together in a book for you,
So that my child some day when she is grown
May know the friendly folk her father knew.

Wondering how fathers can be so absurd,
Perhaps you'll take it idly from the shelves,
And, reading, hear, as once I overheard,
These men and women talking to themselves.

And so find out how they faced life and earned,
As you one day must earn, a livelihood,
And how, in spite of everything, they learned
To take their luck through life and find it good.

And, maybe, as you share each hope and fear
And all the secrets that they never told,
For their sake you'll forgive your father, dear,
Almost for being so absurd and old.

And may it somewhat help to make amends
To think that, in their sorrow and their mirth,
Such men and women were your father's friends
In old incredible days before your birth.

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LIVELIHOOD

THE OLD NAIL-SHOP

I dreamt of wings,—and waked to hear
Through the low-sloping ceiling clear
The nesting starlings flutter and scratch
Among the rafters of the thatch,
Not twenty inches from my head;
And lay, half-dreaming in my bed,
Watching the far elms—bolt-upright
Black towers of silence in a night
Of stars, between the window-sill
And the low-hung eaves, square-framed, until
I drowsed, and must have slept a wink . . .
And wakened to a ceaseless clink
Of hammers ringing on the air . . .
And, somehow, only half-aware,
I'd risen and crept down the stair,
Bewildered by strange smoky gloom,
Until I'd reached the living-room
That once had been a nail-shop shed.
And where my hearth had blazed, instead
I saw the nail-forge glowing red;
And, through the stife and smoky glare,
Three dreaming women standing there
With hammers beating red-hot wire
On tinkling anvils, by the fire,
To ten-a-penny nails; and heard—
Though none looked up or breathed a word—

LIVELIHOOD

The song each heart sang to the tune
Of hammers, through a summer's noon,
When they had wrought in that red glow,
Alive, a hundred years ago—
The song of girl and wife and crone,
Sung in the heart of each alone . . .

The dim-eyed crone with nodding head—
“He's dead; and I'll, too, soon be dead.”

The grave-eyed mother, gaunt with need—
“Another little mouth to feed!”

The black-eyed girl, with eyes alight—
“I'll wear the yellow beads to-night.”

THE SHAFT

He must have lost his way, somehow. 'Twould
seem

He'd taken the wrong turning, back a bit,
After his lamp . . . or was it all a dream
That he'd nigh reached the cage—his new lamp lit
And swinging in his hand, and whistling, glad
To think the shift was over—when he'd tripped
And stumbled, like the daft, club-footed lad
His mother called him; and his lamp had slipped
And smashed to smithereens; and left him there
In pitchy dark, half-stunned, and with barked
shins?

He'd cursed his luck; although he didn't care,
Not overmuch: you suffered for your sins:
And, anyway, he must be nigh the shaft;
And he could fumble his way out somehow,
If he were last, and none came by. 'Twas daft
To do a trick like thon.

And even now

His mother would be waiting. How she'd laugh
To hear about it! She was always game
For fun, she was, and such a one for chaff—
A fellow had no chance. But 'twas the same
With women always: you could never tell
What they'd be at, or after saying next:
They'd such queer, tricky tongues; and it was well
For men to let them talk when they were vexed—

LIVELIHOOD

Although, his mother, she was seldom cross.
But she'd be wondering, now, ay, that she would—
Hands folded in her apron, at a loss
To know what kept him, even now she stood,
Biting her lips, he'd warrant. She aye bit
Her lips till they were white when things went
wrong.

She'd never liked his taking to the pit,
After his father'd. . . . Ay, and what a song
She'd make . . . and supper cold! It must be
late.

The last on the last shift! After to-day
The pit was being laid idle! Jack, his mate,
Had left him, tidying—hurrying away
To back . . . And no night-shift . . .

If that cursed lamp

Had not gone out. . . . But that was hours ago—
How many hours he couldn't tell. The cramp
Was in his thighs. And what could a lad know
Who'd crawled for hours upon his hands and knees
Through miles on miles of hot, black, dripping night
Of low-roofed, unfamiliar galleries?

He'd give a hundred pound to stand upright
And stretch his legs a moment: but, somehow,
He'd never reached a refuge, though he'd felt
The walls on either hand. He'd bumped his brow
Till he was dizzy. And the heat would melt
The marrow in his bones. And yet he'd gone
A dozen miles at least, and hadn't found
Even a crossway. On and on and on
He'd crawled, and crawled; and never caught a sound

LIVELIHOOD

And couldn't shout to save himself . . . His head
Seemed full of water, dripping, dripping, drip-
ping . . .

And he, somehow, inside it—huge and dark
His own skull soared above him . . . He kept
slipping,

And clutching at the crumbling walls . . . A
spark

Flared suddenly; and to a blood-red blaze
His head was bursting; and the pain would
break . . .

'Twas solid coal he'd run against, adaze—
Coal, sure enough. And he was broad awake,
And crawling still through that unending drift
Of some old working, long disused. He'd known
That there were such. If he could only lift
His head a moment; but the roof of stone
Crushed low upon him. A gey narrow seam
He must be in,—and bad to work: no doubt
That's why 'twas given up. He'd like to scream,
His cut knees hurt so sorely; but a shout
Might bring the crumbling roof down on his head,
And squash him flat.

If he could only creep
Between the cool white sheets of his own bed,
And turn towards the wall, and sleep, and sleep—
And dream, maybe, of pigeons soaring high,
Turning and tumbling in the morning light,
With wings ashimmer in a cloudless sky.
He'd give the world to see a bonnie flight

THE SHAFT

Of his own pigeons rise with flapping wings,
Soaring and sweeping almost out of sight,
Till he was dizzy, watching the mad things
Tossing and tumbling at that dazzling height.
Ay, and his homers, too—if they'd come in,
He hoped his mother'd fed them. They would be
Fair famished after such a flight, and thin.
But she would feed them, sure enough; for she
Liked pigeons, too—would stand there at the door
With arms akimbo, staring at the blue,
Her black eyes shining as she watched them soar,
Without a word, till they were out of view.
And how she laughed to hear them scold and pout,
Ruffle and fuss—like menfolk, she would say:
Nobody knowing what 'twas all about,
And least of all themselves. That was her way,
To joke and laugh the tantrums out of him.
He'd tie his neckerchief before the glass;
And she'd call him her pigeon, Peter Prim,
Preening himself, she'd say, to meet his lass—
Though he'd no lass, not he! A scarf well tied,
No gaudy colours, just a red or yellow,
Was what he fancied. What harm if he tried
To keep himself respectable! A fellow—
Though womenfolk might laugh and laugh . . .

And now

He wondered if he'd hear her laugh again
With hands on hips and sparkling eyes. His
brow

Seemed clapt with red-hot iron bands; and pain
Shot red-hot needles through his legs—his back,

LIVELIHOOD

A raw and aching spine that bore the strain
Of all the earth above him: the dead black
Unending clammy night blinding his brain
To a black blankness shot with scarlet streaks
Of searing lightning; and he scarcely knew
If he'd been crawling hours, or days, or weeks . . .
And now the lightning glimmered faintly blue,
And gradually the blackness paled to grey:
And somewhere, far ahead, he caught the gleam
Of light, daylight, the very light of day,
Day, dazzling day!

Thank God, it was no dream.
He felt a cooler air upon his face;
And scrambling madly for some moments more,
Though centuries it seemed, he reached the place
Where through the chinks of the old crumbling
door
Of a disused upcast-shaft, grey ghostly light
Strained feebly, though it seemed the sun's own
blaze
To eyes so long accustomed to the night
And peering blindly through that pitchy maze.
The door dropped from its hinges—and upright
He stood, at last, bewildered and adaze,
In a strange dazzling world of flowering white.
Plumed snowy fronds and delicate downy sprays,
Fantastic as the feathery work of frost,
Drooped round him from the wet walls of the
shaft—

THE SHAFT

A monstrous growth of mould, huge mould. And
lost

In wonder he stood gaping; and then laughed
To see that living beauty—quietly

He laughed to see it: and awhile forgot
All danger. He would tell his mother: she
Would scarce know whether to believe or not,—
But laugh to hear how, when he came on it,
It dazzled him. If she could only see
That fluffy white—come on it from the pit,
Snow-white as fantails' feathers, suddenly
As he had, she'd laugh too: she . . .

Icy cold

Shot shuddering through him, as he stept beneath
A trickle. He looked up. That monstrous mould
Frightened him; and he stood with chattering teeth,
Seeming to feel it growing over him
Already, shutting out the fleck of sky
That up the slimy shaft gleamed far and dim.
'Twould flourish on his bones when he should lie
Forgotten in the shaft. Its clammy breath
Was choking him already. He would die,
And no one know how he'd come by his death . . .
Dank, cold mould growing slowly. By and by
'Twould cover him; and not a soul to tell . . .

With a wild cry he tried to scramble out,
Clutching the wall . . . Mould covered him . . .

He fell,
As, close at hand, there came an answering shout.

IN THE ORCHESTRA

He'd played each night for months; and never heard
A single tinkly tune, or caught a word
Of all the silly songs and sillier jests;
And he'd seen nothing, even in the rests,
Of that huge audience piled from floor to ceiling
Whose stacked white faces sent his dazed wits
reeling . . .

He'd been too happy; and had other things
To think of while he scraped his fiddle-strings . . .

But now, he'd nothing left to think about—
Nothing he dared to think of . . .

In and out

The hollow fiddle of his head the notes
Jingled and jangled; and the raucous throats
Of every star rasped jibes into his ear,—
Each separate syllable, precise and clear,
As though 'twere life or death if he should miss
A single cackle, crow or quack, or hiss
Of cockadoodling fools . . .

A week ago

He'd sat beside her bed; and heard her low
Dear voice talk softly of her hopes and fears—
Their hopes and fears; and every afternoon
He'd watched her lying there . . .

A fat buffoon

In crimson trousers prancing, strut and cluck—

IN THE ORCHESTRA

Cackling: "A fellow never knows his luck.
He never knows his luck. He never knows
His luck." . . . And in and out the old gag goes
Of either ear, and in and out again,
Playing at "You-can't-catch-me" through his
brain—

"Er knows his luck." . . .

How well they thought they knew
Their luck, and such a short while since, they two
Together. Life was lucky: and 'twas good
Then, to be fiddling for a livelihood—
His livelihood and hers . . .

A woman sang
With grinning teeth. The whole house rocked and
rang.

In the whole house there was no empty place:
And there were grinning teeth in every face
Of all those faces, grinning, tier on tier,
From orchestra to ceiling chandelier
That caught in every prism a grinning light,
As from the little black box up a height
The changing limelight streamed down on the
stage.

And he was filled with reasonless, dull rage
To see those grinning teeth, those grinning rows;
And wondered if those lips would never close,
But gape for ever through an endless night,
Grinning and mowing in the green limelight.

And now they seemed to grin in mockery
Of him; and then, as he turned suddenly

LIVELIHOOD

To face them, flaming, it was his own face
That mowed and grinned at him from every
place—

Grimacing on him with the set, white grin
Of his own misery through that dazzling din . . .
Yet, all the while he hadn't raised his head,
But fiddled, fiddled for his daily bread,
His livelihood—no longer hers . . .

And now

He heard no more the racket and the row,
Nor saw the aching, glittering glare, nor smelt
The smother of hot breaths and smoke—but felt
A wet wind on his face . . .

He sails again

Home with her up the river in the rain—
Leaving the grey domes and grey colonnades
Of Greenwich in their wake as daylight fades—
By huge dark cavernous wharves with flaring lights,
Warehouses built for some mad London night's
Fantastic entertainment,—grimmer far
Than Baghdad dreamt of—monstrous and bizarre,
They loom against the night; and seem to hold
Preposterous secrets horrible and old,
Behind black doors and windows.

Yet even they

Make magic with more mystery the way,
As, hand in hand, they sail through the blue
gloom
Up the old river of enchantment, home . . .

IN THE ORCHESTRA

He heard strange, strangled voices—he, alone
Once more,—like voices through the telephone,
Thin and unreal, inarticulate
Twanging and clucking at terrific rate—
Pattering, pattering . . .

And again aware

He grew of all the racket and the glare,
Aware again of the antic strut and cluck—
And there was poor old “Never-know-his-luck”
Doing another turn—yet, not a smile,
Although he'd changed his trousers and his
style.

The same old trousers and the same old wheeze
Was what the audience liked. He tried to please,
And knew he failed: and suddenly turned old
Before those circling faces glum and cold—
A fat old man with cracked voice piping thin,
Trying to make those wooden faces grin,
With frantic kicks and desperate wagging head,
To win the applause that meant his daily bread—
Gagging and prancing for a livelihood,
His daily bread . . .

God! how he understood!

He'd fiddled for their livelihood—for her,
And for the one who never came . . .

A stir

Upon the stage; and now another turn—
The old star guttered out, too old to burn.
And he remembered she had liked the chap
When she'd been there that night. He'd seen her clap,

LIVELIHOOD

Laughing so merrily. She liked it all—
The razzle-dazzle of the music-hall—
And laughing faces . . . said she liked to see
Hardworking people laughing heartily
After the day's work. She liked everything—
His playing, even! Snap . . . another string—
The third!

And she'd been happy in that place,
Seeing a friendly face in every face.
That was her way—the whole world was her friend.
And she'd been happy, happy to the end,
As happy as the day was long

And he
Fiddled on, dreaming of her quietly.

THE SWING

'Twas jolly, swinging through the air,
With young Dick Garland sitting there
Tugging the rope with might and main,
His round face flushed, his arms astrain,
His laughing blue eyes shining bright,
As they went swinging through the light—
As they went swinging, ever higher
Until it seemed that they came nigher
At every swing to the blue sky—
Until it seemed that by-and-by
The boat would suddenly swing through
That sunny dazzle of clear blue—
And they, together . . .

Yesterday
She'd hardly thought she'd get away:
The mistress was that cross, and she
Had only told her after tea
That ere she left she must set to
And turn the parlour out. She knew,
Ay, well enough, that it meant more
Than two hours' work. And so at four
She'd risen that morn; and done it all
Before her mistress went to call
And batter at her bedroom door
At six to rouse her. Such a floor,
So hard to sweep; and all that brass
To polish! Any other lass

LIVELIHOOD

But her would have thrown up the place,
And told the mistress to her face . . .

But how could she! Her money meant
So much to them at home. 'Twas spent
So quickly, though so hard to earn.
She'd got to keep her place, and learn
To hold her tongue. Though it was hard,
The little house in Skinner's Yard
Must be kept going. She would rob
The bairns if she should lose her job,
And they'd go hungry . . .

Since the night
They'd brought home father, cold and white,
Upon a stretcher, mother and she
Had had to struggle ceaselessly
To keep a home together at all.
'Twas lucky she was big and tall
And such a strong lass for fifteen.
She couldn't think where they'd have been
If she'd not earned enough to feed
And help to keep the bairns from need—
Those five young hungry mouths . . .

And she

For one long day beside the sea
Was having a rare holiday . . .

'Twas queer that Dick should want to pay
So much good money, hardly earned,
To bring her with him . . .

THE SWING

How it burned,
That blazing sun in the blue sky!
And it was good to swing so high—
So high into the burning blue,
Until it seemed they'd swing right through . . .

And good just to be sitting there
And watching Dick with tumbled hair
And his red necktie floating free
Against the blue of sky and sea,
As up and down and up and down
Beyond the low roofs of the town
They swung and swung . . .

And he was glad

To pay for her, the foolish lad,
And happy to be swinging there
With her, and rushing through the air,
So high into the burning blue
It seemed that they would swing right through . . .

'Twas well that she had caught the train,
She'd had to run with might and main
To catch it: and Dick waiting there
With tickets ready . . .

How his hair

Shone in the sunshine, and the light
Made his blue, laughing eyes so bright
Whenever he looked up at her . . .

She'd like to sit, and never stir
Again out of that easy seat—

LIVELIHOOD

With no more mats to shake and beat
And no more floors to sweep, no stairs
To scrub, and no more heavy chairs
To move—for she was sleepy now . . .
Dick's hair had fallen over his brow
Into his eyes. He shook them free,
And laughed to her. 'Twas queer that he
Should think it worth his while to pay,
And give her such a holiday . . .
But she was sleepy now. 'Twas rare,
As they were rushing through the air
To see Dick's blue eyes shining bright
As they went swinging through the light,
As they went swinging ever higher
Until it seemed that they came nigher
At every swing to that blue sky—
Until it seemed that by-and-by
Their boat would suddenly swing through
That sunny dazzle of clear blue . . .

If she could swing for evermore
With Dick above that golden shore,
With no more parlour-floors to sweep—
If she could only swing and sleep . . .
And wake to see Dick's eyes burn bright,
To see them laughing with delight
As suddenly they swung right through
That sudden dazzle of clear blue—
And they two, sailing on together
For ever through that shining weather!

THE DROVE-ROAD

'Twas going to snow—'twas snowing! Curse his
luck!

And fifteen mile to travel—here was he
With nothing but an empty pipe to suck,
And half a flask of rum—but that would be
More welcome later on. He'd had a drink
Before he left; and that would keep him warm
A tidy while: and 'twould be good to think
He'd something to fall back on, if the storm
Should come to much. You never knew with snow.
A sup of rain he didn't mind at all,
But snow was different with so far to go—
Full fifteen mile, and not a house of call.
Ay, snow was quite another story, quite—
Snow on these fell-tops with a north-east wind
Behind it, blowing steadily with a bite
That made you feel that you were stark and
skinned.

And these poor beasts—and they just off the boat
A day or so, and hardly used to land—
Still dizzy with the sea, their wits afloat.
When they first reached the dock, they scarce could
stand,
They'd been so joggled. It's gey bad to cross,
After a long day's jolting in the train
Thon Irish Channel, always pitch and toss—

LIVELIHOOD

And heads or tails, not much for them to gain!
And then the market, and the throng and noise
Of yapping dogs; and they stung mad with fear,
Welted with switches by those senseless boys—
He'd like to dust their jackets! But 'twas queer,
A beast's life, when you came to think of it
From start to finish—queerer, ay, a lot
Than any man's, and chancier a good bit.
With his ash-sapling at their heels they'd got
To travel before night those fifteen miles
Of hard fell-road, against the driving snow,
Half-blinded, on and on. He thought at whiles
'Twas just as well for them they couldn't know . . .

Though, as for that, 'twas little that he knew
Himself what was in store for him. He took
Things as they came. 'Twas all a man could do;
And he'd kept going, somehow, by hook or crook.
And here he was, with fifteen mile of fell,
And snow, and . . . God, but it was blowing
stiff!

And no tobacco. Blest if he could tell
Where he had lost it—but, for half a whiff
He'd swop the very jacket off his back—
Not that he'd miss the cobweb of old shreds
That held the holes together.

Thon Cheap-Jack
Who'd sold it him had said it was Lord Ted's,
And London cut. But Teddy had grown fat
Since he'd been made an alderman . . . His bid?
And did the gentleman not want a hat

THE DROVE-ROAD

To go with it, a topper? If he did,
Here was the very . . .

Hell, but it was cold:
And driving dark it was—nigh dark as night.
He'd almost think he must be getting old,
To feel the wind so. And long out of sight
The beasts had trotted. Well, what odds! The
way
Ran straight for ten miles on, and they'd go
straight.

They'd never heed a by-road. Many a day
He'd had to trudge on, trusting them to fate,
And always found them safe. They scamper fast,
But in the end a man could walk them down.
They're showy trotters; but they cannot last.
He'd race the fastest beast for half-a-crown
On a day's journey. Beasts were never made
For steady travelling; drive them twenty mile,
And they were done; while he was not afraid
To tackle twice that distance with a smile.

But not a day like this! He'd never felt
A wind with such an edge. 'Twas like the blade
Of the rasper in the pocket of his belt
He kept for easy shaving. In his trade
You'd oft to make your toilet under a dyke—
And he was always one for a clean chin,
And carried soap.

He'd never felt the like—
That wind, it cut clean through him to the skin.
He might be mother-naked, walking bare,

LIVELIHOOD

For all the use his clothes were, with the snow
Half-blinding him, and clagging to his hair,
And trickling down his spine. He'd like to know
What was the sense of pegging steadily,
Chilled to the marrow, after a daft herd
Of draggled beasts he couldn't even see!

But that was him all over! Just a word,
A nod, a wink, the price of half-and-half—
And he'd be setting out for God-knows-where,
With no more notion than a yearling calf
Where he would find himself when he got there.
And he'd been travelling hard on sixty year
The same old road, the same old giddy gait;
And he'd be walking, for a pint of beer,
Into his coffin, one day, soon or late—
But not with such a tempest in his teeth,
Half-blinded and half-dothered, that he hoped!
He'd met a sight of weather on the heath,
But this beat all.

'Twas worse than when he'd groped
His way that evening down the Mallerstang—
Thon was a blizzard, thon—and he was done,
And almost dropping when he came a bang
Against a house—slap-bang, and like to stun!—
Though that just saved his senses—and right there
He saw a lighted window he'd not seen,
Although he'd nearly staggered through its glare
Into a goodwife's kitchen, where she'd been
Baking hot griddlecakes upon the peat.
And he could taste them now, and feel the glow

THE DROVE-ROAD

Of steady, aching, tingly, drowsy heat,
As he sat there and let the caking snow
Melt off his boots, staining the sanded floor.
And that brown jug she took down from the
shelf—

And every time he'd finished, fetching more,
And piping: "Now reach up, and help yourself!"
She was a wonder, thon, the gay old wife—
But no such luck this journey. Things like that
Could hardly happen every day of life,
Or no one would be dying, but the fat
And oily undertakers, starved to death
For want of custom . . . Hell! but he would soon
Be giving them a job . . . It caught your breath,
That throttling wind. And it was not yet noon;
And he'd be travelling through it until dark.
Dark! 'Twas already dark, and might be night
For all that he could see . . .

And not a spark

Of comfort for him! Just to strike a light,
And press the kindling shag down in the bowl,
Keeping the flame well-shielded by his hand,
And puff, and puff! He'd give his very soul
For half-a-pipe. He couldn't understand
How he had come to lose it. He'd the rum—
Ay, that was safe enough; but it would keep
Awhile, you never knew what chance might come
In such a storm . . .

If he could only sleep . . .

If he could only sleep . . . That rustling sound
Of drifting snow, it made him sleepy-like—

LIVELIHOOD

Drowsy and dizzy, dithering round and round . . .
If he could only curl up under a dyke,
And sleep and sleep . . . It dazzled him, that
white,
Drifting and drifting, round and round and
round . . .
Just half-a-moment's snooze . . . He'd be all
right.

It made his head quite dizzy, that dry sound
Of rustling snow. It made his head go round—
That rustling in his ears . . . and drifting, drift-
ing . . .
If he could only sleep . . . he would sleep sound . . .
God, he was nearly gone!

The storm was lifting;
And he'd run into something soft and warm—
Slap into his own beasts, and never knew.
Huddled they were, bamboozled by the storm—
And little wonder either, when it blew
A blasted blizzard. Still, they'd got to go.
They couldn't stand there snoozing until night.

But they were sniffing something in the snow.
'Twas that had stopped them, something big and
white—
A bundle—nay, a woman . . . and she slept.
But it was death to sleep.

He'd nearly dropt
Asleep himself. 'Twas well that he had kept
That rum; and lucky that the beasts had stopt.

THE DROVE-ROAD

Ay, it was well that he had kept the rum.
He liked his drink: but he had never cared
For soaking by himself, and sitting mum.
Even the best rum tasted better, shared.

THE ROCKLIGHT

Ay, he must keep his mind clear—must not think
Of those two lying dead, or he'd go mad.
The glitter on the lenses made him blink;
The brass glared speckless: work was all he had
To keep his mind clear. He must keep it clear
And free of fancies, now that there was none,
None left but him to light the lantern—near
On fourteen hours yet till that blazing sun
Should drop into that quiet oily sea,
And he must light . . . though it was not his turn:
'Twas Jacob's,—Jacob, lying quietly
Upon his bed . . . And yet the light would burn
And flash across the darkness just as though
Nothing had happened, white and innocent,
As if Jake's hand had lit it. None would know,
No seaman steering by it, what it meant
To him, since he'd seen Jacob . . .

But that way
Lay madness. He, at least, must keep his wits;
Or there'd be none to tell why those two lay . . .
He must keep working, or he'd go to bits.

Ere sunset, he must wind the lantern up.
He'd like to wind it now—but 'twould go round,
And he'd be fancying . . . Neither bite nor sup
He'd touched this morning; and the clicking sound
Would set his light head fancying . . . Jacob wound

THE ROCKLIGHT

So madly that last time, before . . . But he,
He mustn't think of Jacob. He was bound,
In duty bound, to keep his own wits free
And clear of fancies.

He would think of home.

That thought would keep him whole, when all else
failed—

The green door; and the doorstep, white as foam;
The window that blazed bright the night he sailed
Out of the moonlit harbour,—clean and gay
'Twould shine this morning in the sun, with white
Dimity curtains, and a grand display
Of red geraniums, glowing in the light.
He always liked geraniums: such a red—
It put a heart in you. His mother, too,
She liked . . .

And she'd be lying still in bed,
And never dreaming! If she only knew!
But he, . . . he mustn't think of them just now—
Must keep off fancies . . .

She'd be lying there,
Sleeping so quietly—her smooth white brow
So calm beneath the wisps of silver hair
Slipped out beneath her mutch-frills. She had pride
In those fine caps, and ironed them herself.
The very morning that his father'd died,
Drowned in the harbour, turning to the shelf,
She took her iron down, without a word,
And ironed, with her husband lying dead . . .
As they were lying now . . . He never heard
Her speak, or saw her look towards the bed.

LIVELIHOOD

She ironed, ironed. He had thought it queer—
The little shivering lad perched in his chair,
And hungry—though he dared not speak for fear
His father'ld wake, and with wet streaming hair
Would rise up from the bed . . .

He'd thought it strange
Then, but he understood now, understood.
You'd got to work, or let your fancies range;
And fancies played the devil when they could.
They got the upper hand, if you loosed grip
A moment. Iron frills, or polish brass
To keep a hold upon yourself, not slip
As Jacob slipt . . .

A very burning-glass
Those lenses were. He'ld have to drop off soon,
And find another job to fill the morn,
And keep him going through the afternoon—
And it was not yet five! . . .

Ay, he was born
In the very bed where still his mother slept,
And where his father'd lain—a cupboard bed
Let in the wall, more like a bunk, and kept
Decent with curtains drawn from foot to head
By day, though why—but 'twas the women's way:
They always liked things tidy. They were right—
Better to keep things tidy through the day,
Or there would be the devil's mess by night.
He liked things shipshape, too, himself. He took
After his mother in more ways than one.

THE ROCKLIGHT

He'd say this for her—she could never brook
A sloven; and she'd made a tidy son.

'Twas well for him that he was tidy, now
That he was left; or how'd he ever keep
His thoughts in hand . . . The Lord alone knew
how
He'd keep them tidy, till . . .

Yet, she could sleep:
And he was glad, ay, glad that she slept sound.
It did him good, to think of her so still.
It kept his thoughts from running round and round
Like Jacob in the lighted lantern, till . . .
God! They were breaking loose! He must keep
hold . . .

On one side, "Albert Edward, Prince of Wales,"
Framed in cut cork, painted to look like gold—
On the other a red frigate, with white sails
Belying, and a blue pennon fluttering free,
Upon a sea dead calm. He couldn't think,
As a wee lad, how ever this could be.
And when he'd asked, his father with a wink
Had only answered laughing: Little chaps
Might think they knew a lot, and had sharp eyes.
But only pigs could see the wind. Perhaps
The painter'd no pig by him to advise.

That was his father's way: he'd always jest,
And chuckle in his beard, with eyes half-shut

LIVELIHOOD

And twinkling . . . Strange to think of them at
rest

And lightless, those blue eyes, beneath that cut
Where the jagged rock had gashed his brow—the
day

His wife kept ironing those snowy frills,
To keep herself from thinking how he lay,
And wouldn't jest again. It's that that kills—
The thinking over . . .

Jacob jested, too:

He'd always some new game, was full of chaff.

The very morn before the lantern drew . . .

Yesterday morn that was, he heard him laugh . . .

Yesterday morn! And was it just last night
He'd wakened, startled; and run out, to find
Jacob within the lantern, round the light
Fluttering like a moth, naked and blind
And laughing . . . Peter staring, turned to
stone . . .

The struggle . . . Peter killed . . .

And he must keep

His mind clear at all costs, himself, alone
On that grey naked rock of the great deep,
Full forty mile from shore—where there were men
Alive and breathing at this moment—ay,
Men who were deep in slumber even then,
And yet would waken and look on the sky.

He must keep his mind clear, to light the lamp
Ere sunset: ay, and clear the long night through

THE ROCKLIGHT

To tell how they had died. He mustn't scamp
The truth—and yet 'twas little that he knew . . .
What had come over Jacob in the night
To send him mad and stripping himself bare . . .
And how he'd ever climbed into the light—
And it revolving . . . and the heat and glare!
No wonder he'd gone blind—the lenses burning
And blazing round him; and in each he'd see
A little naked self . . . and turning, turning,
Till, blinded, scorched, and laughing crazily,
He'd dropped: and Peter . . . Peter might have
 known
The truth, if he had lived to tell the tale—
But Peter'd tripped . . . and he was left
 alone . . .

Just thirty hours till he should see the sail
Bringing them food and letters—food for them;
Letters from home for them . . . and here was he
Shuddering like a boat from stern to stem
When a wave takes it broadside suddenly.
He must keep his mind clear . . .

 His mother lay
Peacefully slumbering. And she, poor soul,
Had kept her mind clear, ironing that day—
Had kept her wits about her, sound and whole—
And for his sake. Ay, where would he have been,
If she had let her fancies have their way
That morning, having seen what she had seen!
He'd thought it queer . . . But it was no child's
 play

LIVELIHOOD

Keeping the upper hand of your own wits.
He knew that now. If only for her sake.
He mustn't let his fancies champ their bits
Until they foamed . . . He must jam on the brake
Or he . . .

He must think how his mother slept;
How soon she would be getting out of bed;
Would dress; and breakfast by the window, kept
So lively with geraniums blazing red;
Would open the green door, and wash the stone,
Foam-white enough already: then, maybe,
She'd take her iron down, and, all alone,
Would iron, iron, iron steadily—
Keeping her fancies quiet, till he came . . .

To-morrow, he'd be home: he'd see the white
Welcoming threshold, and the window's flame,
And her grave eyes kindling with kindly light.

THE PLOUGH

He sniffed the clean and eager smell
Of crushed wild garlic, as he thrust
Beneath the shallows: and a spell
He stood there munching a thick crust—
The fresh tang giving keener zest
To bread and cheese—and watched a pair
Of wagtails preening wing and breast,
Then running—flirting tails in air,
And pied plumes sleeked to silky sheen—
Chasing each other in and out
The wet wild garlic's white and green.

And then remembering, with a shout,
And rattle whirring, he ran back
Again into the Fair Maid's Mead,
To scare the rascal thieves and black
That flocked from far and near to feed
Upon the sprouting grain. As one
They rose with clapping rustling wings—
Rooks, starlings, pigeons, in the sun
Circling about him in wide rings,
And plovers hovering over him
In mazy, interweaving flight—
Until it made his young wits swim
To see them up against the light,
A dazzling dance of black and white
Against the clear blue April sky—
Wings on wings in flashing flight
Swooping low and soaring high—

LIVELIHOOD

Swooping, soaring, fluttering, flapping,
Tossing, tumbling, swerving, dipping,
Chattering, cawing, creaking, clapping,
Till he felt his senses slipping—
And gripped his corncrake rattle tight,
And flourished it above his head
Till every bird was out of sight:
And laughed, when all had flown and fled,
To think that he, and all alone,
Could put so many thieves to rout.

Then sitting down upon a stone
He wondered if the school were out—
The school where, only yesterday,
He'd sat at work among his mates—
At work that now seemed children's play,
With pens and pencils, books and slates—
Although he'd liked it well enough,
The hum and scuffling of the school,
And hadn't cared when Grim-and-Gruff
Would call him dunderhead and fool.

And he could see them sitting there—
His class-mates, in the lime-washed room,
With fingers inked and towzled hair—
Bill Baxter with red cheeks abloom,
And bright black eyes; and Ginger Jim
With freckled face and solemn look,
Who'd wink a pale blue eye at him,
Then sit intent upon his book,
While, caught a-giggle, he was caned.

THE PLOUGH

He'd liked that room, he'd liked it all—
The window steaming when it rained;
The sunlight dancing on the wall
Among the glossy charts and maps;
The blotchy stain beside the clock
That only he of all the chaps
Knew for a chart of Dead Man's Rock
That lies in Tiger Island Bay—
The reef on which the schooners split
And founder, that would bear away
The treasure-chest of Cut-Throat-Kit,
That's buried under Black Bill's bones
Beneath the purple pepper-tree . . .
A trail of clean-sucked cherry-stones,
Which you must follow carefully,
Across the dunes of yellow sand
Leads winding upward from the beach
Till, with a pistol in each hand,
And cutlass 'twixt your teeth, you reach . . .

Plumping their fat crops peacefully
Were plovers, pigeons, starlings, rooks,
Feeding on every side while he
Was in the land of storybooks.
He raised his rattle with a shout
And scattered them with yell and crake . . .
A man must mind what he's about
And keep his silly wits awake,
Not go woolgathering, if he'd earn
His wage. And soon, no schoolboy now,
He'd take on a man's job, and learn

LIVELIHOOD

To build a rick, and drive the plough,
Like father . . .

Up against the sky
Beyond the spinney and the stream,
With easy stride and steady eye
He saw his father drive his team,
Turning the red marl gleaming wet
Into long furrows clean and true.
And dreaming there, he longed to set
His young hand to the ploughshare too.

THE OLD PIPER

With ears undulled of age, all night he heard
The April singing of the Otterburn.
His wife slept quietly and never stirred,
Though he was restless and must toss and turn—
But she kept going all the day, while he
Was just a useless bundle in a chair,
And couldn't do a hand's turn—seventy-three,
And crippled with rheumatics . . .

It was rare,
Hearing the curlew piping in the dark!
'Twas queer he'd got his hearing still so keen.
He'd be so bothered if he couldn't hark
To curlew piping, shrill and clear and clean—
Ay, clean, that note!

His piping days were done,
His fingers numb and stiff. And by the peat
All winter, or all summer in the sun,
He'd sit beside the threshold, in his seat,
Day-long, and listen to the Otterburn
That sang each day and night a different tune.
It knew more airs than he could ever learn
Upon the small-pipes. January to June,
And June to January, every hour
It changed its music. Now 'twas shrilling clear
In a high tinkling treble with a power
Of mellow undertones. And to his ear
Even the spates of winter over stones

LIVELIHOOD

Made no dull tuneless thundering; he heard
No single roar, but half a hundred tones
Eddying and swirling; blending, yet unblurred;
No dull-edged note, but each one razor-keen—
Though supple as the sword-blades interlaced
Over the morris-dancers' heads—and clean!
But, nay, there was no word for it. 'Twas waste
Of breath to try and put the thing in words,
Though on his pipes he'd get the sense of it,
The feel—ay, even of the calls of birds
He'd get some notion, though low-toned a bit—
His humming drone had not that quality
Of clean-cut piping. Any shepherd lad
Upon his penny-whistle easily
Could mimic the mere notes. And yet he had
A gift of feeling, somehow . . . He must try
To-morrow if he couldn't tune his pipes,
Must get his wife to strap them carefully . . .
Hark, a new note among the birds—a snipe's—
A small-pipe's note! . . .

Drowsing, he did not wake
Until his wife was stirring.

Nor till noon
He told her that he'd half-a-mind to take
His pipes and see if he could turn a tune
If she would fetch them. And regretfully
She brought the pipes and strapped them on and set
The bellows under his arm, and patiently
She held the reeds to his numb fingers. Yet
She knew 'twas worse than useless. Work and
years

THE OLD PIPER

Had dulled that lively touch: each joint was stiff
And swollen with rheumatics . . .

Slowly tears

Ran down his weathered cheeks . . .

And then a whiff

Of peat-reek filled his nostrils: and quite still
He sat remembering. Memory was kind
And stript age off him.

And along the hill

By Golden Pots he strove against the wind—
In all his days he never again had known
A wind like thon—on that November day.
For every step that he took forward, blown
Half-a-step backward, slowly he made way
Against it, buffeted and battered numb,
Chilled to the marrow, till he reached his door,
To find Jack Dodd, the pitman piper, come
To play a contest with him . . .

Nevermore

There'ld be such piping!

Ay, Jack Dodd had heard

That he could play—that up among the hills
There was a lad could pipe like any bird,
With half-a-hundred fancy turns and trills,
And give a lead even to Jack himself,
Jack Dodd, the pitmen's champion!

After tea

When they had smoked a while, down from the
shelf

He'd reached his own small-pipes; and speedily
They two were at it, playing, tune for tune,

LIVELIHOOD

Against each other all the winter's night,
And all next morning till the stroke of noon,
Piping out bravely all their hearts' delight.

He still could see Jack, sitting there, so lean,
Long-backed, broad-shouldered, stooping and white-
faced

With cropped black head, and black eyes burning
keen;

Tight-lipped, yet smiling gravely: round his waist
His small-pipes strapped, the bellows 'neath his arm,
His nimble fingers lively at the reeds,—
His body swaying to the lilting charm
Of his own magic piping, till great beads
Of sweat were glistening on his low, white brow.

And he himself, a herd-lad, yellow-haired,
With wide eyes even bluer then than now,
Who sat bolt-upright in his chair and stared
Before him at the steady glowing peat
As though each note he played he caught in flight
From the loud wind, and in the quivering heat
Could see it dancing to its own delight.

All night the rafters hummed with piping airs,
And candle after candle guttered out;
But not a footstep climbed the creaking stairs
To the dark bedrooms. Turn and turn about,
They piped or listened; while the wind without
Roared round the steading, battering at the door
As though to burst it wide; then with a shout
Swept on across the pitchy leagues of moor.

THE OLD PIPER

Pitman and shepherd piping turn for turn,
The airs they loved, till to the melody
Their pulses beat; and their rapt eyes would burn
Thrilled with the sight that each most loved to
see—

The pitman, gazing down a gallery
Of glittering black coal, an endless seam:
And through his piping stole the mystery
Of subterranean waters, and of dream
Corridors dwindling everlastingly.

The shepherd, from the top of Windy Gile
Looking o'er range on range of glowing hills,
A world beneath him, stretching, mile on mile,
Brown bent and heather, laced by flashing rills,—
His body flooded with the light that fills
The veins with running gold. And April light
And wind, and all the melody that spills
From tumbling waters, thrilled his pipes that night.

Ay, thon was playing, thon! And nevermore
The world would hear such piping. Jack was dead,
And he, so old and broken.

By the door

All day he sat remembering; and in bed
He lay beside his sleeping wife all night,
Too spent, too weary, even to toss and turn.
Dawn found him lying, strangely cold and white,
As though still listening to the Otterburn.

THE NEWS

The buzzer boomed, and instantly the clang
Of hammers dropt, just as the fendered bow
Bumped with soft splash against the wharf,—
 though now
Again within the Yard a hammer rang—
A solitary hammer striking steel
Somewhere aloft—and strangely, stridently
Echoed as though it struck the steely sky
The low, cold, steely sky.

 She seemed to feel
That hammer in her heart—blow after blow
In a strange clanging hollow seemed to strike
Monotonous, unrelenting, cruel-like—
Her heart that such a little while ago
Had been so full, so happy with its news
Scarce uttered even to itself.

 It stopt,
That dreadful hammer. And the silence dropt
Again a moment. Then a clatter of shoes
And murmur of voices as the men trooped out:
And as each wife with basket and hot can
Hurried towards the gate to meet her man,
She too ran forward, and then stood in doubt
Because among them all she could not see
The face that usually was first of all
To meet her eyes.

THE NEWS

Against the grimy wall
That towered black above her to the sky,
With trembling knuckles to the cold stone pressed
Till the grit seemed to cut into the bone,
And her stretched arm to shake the solid stone,
She stood, and strove to calm her troubled
breast—

Her breast, whose trouble of strange happiness
So sweet and so miraculous, as she
Had stood among the chattering company
Upon the ferry-boat, to strange distress
Was changed. An unknown terror seemed to lie
For her, behind that wall, so cold and hard
And black above her, in the unseen Yard,
Dreadfully quiet now. Then with a sigh
Of glad relief she ran towards the gate
As he came slowly out, the last of all.

The terror of the hammer and the wall
Fell from her as, a woman to her mate,
She moved with happy heart and smile of greet-
ing—

A young and happy wife whose only thought
Was whether he would like the food she'd brought—
Whose one desire, to watch her husband eat-
ing.

With a grave smile he took his bait from her,
And then without a word they moved away
To where some grimy baulks of timber lay
Beside the river, and 'twas quieter

LIVELIHOOD

Than in the crowd of munching, squatting men
And chattering wives and children. As he eat
With absent eyes upon the river set,
She chattered, too, a little now and then
Of household happenings: and then silently
They sat and watched the grimy-flowing stream,
Dazed by the stunning din of hissing steam
Escaping from an anchored boat hard-by,
Each busy with their own thoughts, who till now
Had shared each thought, each feeling, speaking
out

Easily, eagerly, without a doubt,
As happy innocent children, anyhow,
The innermost secrets of their wedded life.
So as the dinner hour went swiftly by
They sat there for the first time, troubled, shy—
A silent husband and a silent wife.

But she was only troubled by excess
Of happiness; and as she watched the stream,
She looked upon her life as in a dream,
Recalling all its tale of happiness
Unbroken and unshadowed since she'd met
Her man the first time, eighteen months ago . . .

A keen blue day with sudden flaws of snow
And sudden sunshine, when she first had set
Her wondering eyes upon him—gaily clad
For football in a jersey green and red,
Knees bare beneath white shorts, his curly head
Wind-blown and wet,—and knew him for her lad.

THE NEWS

He strode towards her down the windy street—
The wet grey pavements flashing sudden gold,
And gold the unending coils of smoke that rolled
Unceasingly overhead, fired by a fleet
Wild glint of glancing sunlight. On he came
Beside her brother—still a raw uncouth
Young hobbledehoy—a strapping mettled youth
In the first pride of manhood, that wild flame
Touching his hair to fire, his cheeks aglow
With the sharp stinging wind, his arms aswing:
And as she watched, she felt the tingling sting
Of flying flakes, and in a whirl of snow
A moment he was hidden from her sight.
It passed, and then before she was aware,
With white flakes powdering his ruddy hair
He stood before her, laughing in the light,
In all his bravery of red and green
Snow-sprinkled; and she laughed, too. In the
sun
They laughed: and in that laughter they were one.

Now as with kindled eyes on the unseen
Grey river she sat gazing, she again
Lived through that moment in a golden dream . . .
And then quite suddenly she saw the stream
Distinct in its cold grimy flowing—then
The present with its deeper happiness
Thrilled her afresh—this wonder strange and
new—
This dream in her young body coming true,
Incredible, yet certain none-the-less—

LIVELIHOOD

This news, scarce broken to herself, that she
Must break to him. She longed to see his eyes
Kindle to hear it, happy with surprise
When she should break it to him presently.

But she must wait a while yet. Still too strange,
Too wonderful for words, she could not share
Even with him her secret. He sat there
So quietly, little dreaming of the change
That had come over her—but when he knew!
For he was always one for bairns, was John,
And this would be his own, their own. There shone
A strange new light on all since this was true,
All, all seemed strange, the river and the shore,
The barges and the wharves with timber piled,
And all her world familiar from a child,
Was as a world she'd never seen before.

And he, too, sat with eyes upon the stream
Remembering that day when first the light
Of her young eyes with laughter sparkling bright
Kindled to his; and as he caught the gleam
The life within him quickened suddenly
To fire, and in a world of golden laughter
They stood alone together: and then after,
When he was playing with his mates and he
Hurtled headlong towards the goal, he knew
Her eyes were on him; and for her alone,
Who had the merriest eyes he'd ever known,
He played that afternoon. Though until then
He'd only played to please himself, somehow
She seemed to have a hold upon him, now.

THE NEWS

No longer a boy, a man among grown men,
He'd never have a thought apart from her,
From her, his mate . . .

And then that golden night
When in a whirl of melody and light,
Her merry brown eyes flashing merrier,
They rode together in a gilded car
That seemed to roll for ever round and round
In a blind blaze of light and blare of sound,
For ever and for ever, till afar
It seemed to bear them from the surging throng
Of lads and lasses happy in release
From the week's work in yards and factories—
For ever through a land of light and song
While they sat, rapt in silence, hand in hand,
And looked into each other's merry eyes,
They two, together, whirled through Paradise,
A golden glittering, unearthly land,
A land where light and melody were one,
And melody and light, a golden fire
That ran through their young bodies, and desire,
A golden music streaming from the sun,
Filling their veins with golden melody
And singing fire . . .

And then when quiet fell,
And they together, with so much to tell,
So much to tell each other instantly,
Left the hot throng and roar and glare behind
Seeking the darker streets, and stood at last
In a dark lane where footsteps seldom passed,
Lit by a far lamp and one glowing blind

LIVELIHOOD

That seemed to make the darkness yet more
dark

Between the cliffs of houses, black and high,
That soared above them to the starry sky,
A deep blue sky where spark on fiery spark
The stars for them were kindled, as they raised
Their eyes in new-born wonder to the night:
And in a solitude of cold starlight
They stood alone together, hushed, and gazed
Into each other's eyes until speech came:
And underneath the stars they talked and
talked . . .

Then he remembered how they two had walked
Along a beach that was one golden flame
Of yellow sand beside a flame-blue sea
The day they wedded, that strange day of dream,
One flame of blue and gold . . .

The murky stream
Flowed once again before his eyes, and he
Dropt back into the present; and he knew
That he must break the news that suddenly
Had come to him last night as drowsily
He lay beside her—startling, stern and true
Out of the darkness flashing. He must tell
How, as he lay beside her in the night
His heart had told him he must go and fight,
Must throw up everything he loved so well
To go and fight in lands across the sea
Beside the other lads—must throw up all,
His work, his home . . .

THE NEWS

The shadow of the wall
Fell on her once again, and stridently
That hammer struck her heart, as from the stream
She raised her eyes to his, and saw their flame.—
Then back into her heart her glad news came
As John smiled on her; and her golden dream
Once more was all about her as she thought
Of home, the new home that the future held
For them—they three together. Fear was quelled
By this new happiness that all unsought
Had sprung from the old happiness . . .

And he
Watching her, thought of home, too. When he
stept

With her across the threshold first, and slept
That first night in her arms so quietly,
For the first time in all his life he'd known
All that home meant, or nearly all—for yet
Each night brought him new knowledge as she
met

Him, smiling on the clean white threshold-stone
When he returned from labour in the Yard . . .

And she'd be waiting for him soon, while he
Was fighting with his fellows oversea—
She would be waiting for him . . .

It was hard
For him that he must go, as go he must,
But harder far for her: things always fell
Harder upon the women. It was well
She didn't dream yet . . . He could only trust

LIVELIHOOD

She, too, would feel that he had got to go,
Then 'twould not be so hard to go, and yet . . .
Dreaming, he saw the lamplit table, set
With silver pot and cups and plates aglow
For tea in their own kitchen bright and snug,
With her behind the tea-pot—saw it all,
The coloured calendars upon the wall,
The bright fire-irons, and the gay hearthrug
She'd made herself from gaudy rags; his place
Awaiting him, with something hot-and-hot—
His favourite sausages as like as not,
Between two plates for him—as, with clean
face
Glowing from washing in the scullery,
And such a hunger on him, he would sink
Content into his chair . . .

'Twas strange to think
All this was over, and so suddenly,—
'Twas strange, and hard . . .

Still gazing on the stream,
Her thoughts, too, were at home. She heard the
patter
Of tiny feet beside her, and the chatter
Of little tongues . . .

Then loudly through their dream
The buzzer boomed: and all about them rose
The men and women: soon the wives were on
The ferry-boat, now puffing to be gone:
The husbands hurrying, ere the gates should
close,
Back to the Yard . . .

THE NEWS

She, in her dream of gold,
And he, in his new desolation, stood;
Then soberly, as wife and husband should,
They parted, with their news as yet untold.

DAFFODILS

He liked the daffodils. He liked to see
Them nodding in the hedgerows cheerily
Along the dusty lanes as he went by—
Nodding and laughing to a fellow—Ay,
Nodding and laughing till you'd almost think
They, too, enjoyed the jest.

Without a wink
That solemn butler said it, calm and smug,
Deep-voiced as though he talked into a jug:
“His lordship says he won't require no more
Crocks rivetted or mended till the war
Is over.”

Lord! He'd asked to have a wire
The moment that his lordship should desire
To celebrate the occasion fittingly
By a wild burst of mending crockery
Like a true Englishman, and hang expense!
He'd had to ask it, though he'd too much sense
To lift a lash or breathe a word before
His lordship's lordship closed the heavy door.
And then he'd laughed. Lord! but it did him good
That quiet laugh. And somewhere in the wood
Behind the Hall there, a woodpecker laughed
Right out aloud as though he'd gone clean daft—

DAFFODILS

Right out aloud he laughed, the brazen bird,
As if he didn't care a straw who heard—
But then he'd not his daily bread to earn
By mending crocks.

And now at every turn
The daffodils are laughing quietly
Nodding and laughing to themselves, as he
Chuckled: Now there's a patriot, real true-blue!

It seemed the daffodils enjoyed it too—
The fun of it. He wished that he could see—
Old solemn-mug—they laughing quietly
At him. But then, he'd never have a dim
Idea they laughed, and, least of all, at him.
He'd never dream they could be laughing at
A butler.

'Twould be good to see the fat
Old peach-cheek in his solemn black and starch
Parading in his pompous parlour-march
Across that field of laughing daffodils.

'Twould be a sight to make you skip up hills,
Ay, crutch and all, and never feel your pack,
To see a butler in his starch and black
Among the daffodils, ridiculous
As that old bubbly-jock with strut and fuss—
Though that was rather rough upon the bird!
For all his pride, he didn't look absurd
Among the flowers—nor even that black sow
Grunting and grubbing in among them now.

And he was glad he hadn't got a trade
That starched the mother-wit in you, and made

LIVELIHOOD

A man look silly in a field of flowers.
'Twas better mending crocks, although for hours
You hobbled on—ay! and, maybe for days—
Hungry and cold along the muddy ways
Without a job. And even when the sun
Was shining, 'twas not altogether fun
To lose the chance of earning a few pence
In these days: though 'twas well he'd got the
sense
To see the funny side of things. It cost
You nothing, laughing to yourself. You lost
Far more by going fiddle-faced through life
Looking for trouble.

He would tell his wife
When he got home. But lord, she'd never see
What tickled him so mightily, not she!
She'd only look up puzzled-like, and say
She didn't wonder at his lordship. Nay,
With tripe and trotters at the price they were
You'd got to count your coppers and take care
Of every farthing.

Jack would see the fun—
Ay, Jack would see the joke. Jack was his son—
The youngest of the lot. And, man-alive,
'Twas queer that only one of all the five
Had got a twinkle in him—all the rest
Dull as ditchwater to the merriest jest.
Good lads enough they were, their mother's sons;
And they'd all pluck enough to face the guns
Out at the front. They'd got their mother's pluck:
And he was proud of them, and wished them luck.

DAFFODILS

That was no laughing matter—though 'twas well
Maybe if you could crack a joke in hell
And shame the devil. Jack, at least, would
fight

As well as any though his heart was light.
Jack was the boy for fighting and for fun;
And he was glad to think he'd got a son
Who, even facing bloody death, would see
That little joke about the crockery,
And chuckle as he charged.

His thoughts dropped back
Through eighteen years; and he again saw Jack
At the old home beneath the Malvern hills,
A little fellow plucking daffodils,
A little fellow who could scarcely walk,
Yet chuckling as he snapped each juicy stalk
And held up every yellow bloom to smell,
Poking his tiny nose into the bell
And sniffing its fresh scent, and chuckling still
As though he'd secrets with each daffodil.
Ay, he could see again the little fellow
In his blue frock among that laughing yellow,
And plovers in their sheeny black and white
Flirting and tumbling in the morning light
About his curly head. He still could see,
Shutting his eyes, as plain as plain could be,
Drift upon drift, those long-dead daffodils
Against the far green of the Malvern hills,
Nodding and laughing round his little lad,
As if to see him happy made them glad—
Nodding and laughing . . .

LIVELIHOOD

They were nodding now,
The daffodils, and laughing—yet, somehow,
They didn't seem so merry now . . .

And he
Was fighting in a bloody trench maybe
For very life this minute . . .

They missed Jack,
And he would give them all to have him back.

BETWEEN THE LINES

When consciousness came back, he found he lay
Between the opposing fires, but could not tell
On which hand were his friends; and either way
For him to turn was chancy—bullet and shell
Whistling and shrieking over him, as the glare
Of searchlights scoured the darkness to blind
day.

He scrambled to his hands and knees ascare,
Dragging his wounded foot through puddled clay,
And tumbled in a hole a shell had scooped
At random in a turnip-field between
The unseen trenches where the foes lay cooped
Through that unending battle of unseen
Dead-locked league-stretching armies; and quite
spent

He rolled upon his back within the pit,
And lay secure, thinking of all it meant—
His lying in that little hole, sore hit,
But living, while across the starry sky
Shrapnel and shell went screeching overhead—
Of all it meant that he, Tom Dodd, should lie
Among the Belgian turnips, while his bed . . .

If it were he, indeed, who'd climbed each night,
Fagged with the day's work, up the narrow stair,
And slipt his clothes off in the candle-light,
Too tired to fold them neatly on a chair

LIVELIHOOD

The way his mother'd taught him—too dog-tired
After the long day's serving in the shop,
Inquiring what each customer required,
Politely talking weather, fit to drop . . .

And now for fourteen days and nights, at least,
He hadn't had his clothes off; and had lain
In muddy trenches, napping like a beast
With one eye open, under sun and rain
And that unceasing hell-fire . . .

It was strange
How things turned out—the chances! You'd just
got
To take your luck in life, you couldn't change
Your luck.

And so here he was lying shot
Who just six months ago had thought to spend
His days behind a counter. Still, perhaps . . .
And now, God only knew how he would end!

He'd like to know how many of the chaps
Had won back to the trench alive, when he
Had fallen wounded and been left for dead,
If any! . . .

This was different, certainly,
From selling knots of tape and reels of thread
And knots of tape and reels of thread and knots
Of tape and reels of thread and knots of tape,
Day in, day out, and answering "Have you got's"
And "Do you keep's," till there seemed no escape
From everlasting serving in a shop,
Inquiring what each customer required,

BETWEEN THE LINES

Politely talking weather, fit to drop,
With swollen ankles, tired . . .

But he was tired
Now. Every bone was aching, and had ached
For fourteen days and nights in that wet trench—
Just duller when he slept than when he waked—
Crouching for shelter from the steady drench
Of shell and shrapnel . . .

That old trench, it seemed
Almost like home to him. He'd slept and fed
And sung and smoked in it, while shrapnel screamed
And shells went whining harmless overhead—
Harmless, at least, as far as he . . .

But Dick—
Dick hadn't found them harmless yesterday,
At breakfast, when he'd said he couldn't stick
Eating dry bread, and crawled out the back way,
And brought them butter in a lordly dish—
Butter enough for all, and held it high,
Yellow and fresh and clean as you could wish—
When plump upon the plate from out the sky
A shell fell bursting . . . Where the butter went,
God only knew! . . .

And Dick . . . He dared not think
Of what had come to Dick . . . or what it meant—
The shrieking and the whistling and the stink
He'd lived in fourteen days and nights. 'Twas
luck

That he still lived . . . And queer how little then
He seemed to care that Dick . . . Perhaps 'twas
pluck

LIVELIHOOD

That hardened him—a man among the men—
Perhaps . . . Yet, only think things out a bit,
And he was rabbit-livered, blue with funk!
And he'd liked Dick . . . and yet when Dick was
hit,
He hadn't turned a hair. The meanest skunk
He should have thought would feel it when his
mate
Was blown to smithereens—Dick, proud as punch,
Grinning like sin, and holding up the plate—
But he had gone on munching his dry hunch,
Unwinking, till he swallowed the last crumb.

Perhaps 'twas just because he dared not let
His mind run upon Dick, who'd been his chum.
He dared not now, though he could not forget.

Dick took his luck. And, life or death, 'twas
luck
From first to last; and you'd just got to trust
Your luck and grin. It wasn't so much pluck
As knowing that you'd got to, when needs must,
And better to die grinning . . .

Quiet now
Had fallen on the night. On either hand
The guns were quiet. Cool upon his brow
The quiet darkness brooded, as he scanned
The starry sky. He'd never seen before
So many stars. Although, of course, he'd known
That there were stars, somehow before the war
He'd never realised them—so thick-sown,

BETWEEN THE LINES

Millions and millions. Serving in the shop,
Stars didn't count for much; and then at nights
Strolling the pavements, dull and fit to drop,
You didn't see much but the city lights.
He'd never in his life seen so much sky
As he'd seen this last fortnight. It was queer
The things war taught you. He'd a mind to try
To count the stars—they shone so bright and
clear.

One, two, three, four . . . Ah, God, but he was
tired . . .

Five, six, seven, eight . . .

Yes: it was number eight.

And what was the next thing that she required?
(Too bad of customers to come so late,
At closing-time!) Again within the shop
He handled knots of tape and reels of thread,
Politely talking weather, fit to drop . . .

When once again the whole sky overhead
Flared blind with searchlights, and the shriek of
shell

And scream of shrapnel roused him. Drowsily
He stared about him wondering. Then he fell
Into deep dreamless slumber.

.
He could see
Two dark eyes peeping at him, ere he knew
He was awake, and it again was day—
An August morning burning to clear blue.
The frightened rabbit scuttled . . .

LIVELIHOOD

Far away,
A sound of firing . . . Up there, in the sky
Big dragon-flies hung hovering . . . Snowballs
burst
About them . . .

Flies and snowballs! With a cry
He crouched to watch the airmen pass—the first
That he'd seen under fire. Lord, that was pluck—
Shells bursting all about them—and what nerve!
They took their chance, and trusted to their luck.
At such a dizzy height to dip and swerve,
Dodging the shell-fire . . .

Hell! but one was hit,
And tumbling like a pigeon, plump . . .

Thank Heaven,
It righted, and then turned; and after it
The whole flock followed safe—four, five, six, seven,
Yes, they were all there safe. He hoped they'd win
Back to their lines in safety. They deserved,
Even if they were Germans . . . 'Twas no sin
To wish them luck. Think how that beggar
swerved

Just in the nick of time!

He, too, must try
To win back to the lines, though, likely as not,
He'd take the wrong turn: but he couldn't lie
For ever in that hungry hole and rot.
He'd got to take his luck, to take his chance
Of being sniped by foes or friends. He'd be
With any luck in Germany or France
Or kingdom-come, next morning . . .

BETWEEN THE LINES

Drearily

The blazing day burnt over him, shot and shell
Whistling and whining ceaselessly. But light
Faded at last, and as the darkness fell
He rose, and crawled away into the night.

STRAWBERRIES

Since four she had been plucking strawberries:
And it was only eight now; and the sun
Already blazing. There'd be little ease
For her until the endless day was done . . .

Yet, why should she have any ease, while he—
While he . . .

But there, she mustn't think of him,
Fighting beneath that burning sun, maybe,—
His rifle nigh red-hot, and every limb
Aching for sleep, the sweat dried on his brow,
And baking in the blaze, and such a thirst,
Prickly and choking, she could feel it now
In her own throat. He'd said it was the worst,
In his last letter, worst of all to bear,
That burning thirst—that, and the hellish noise . . .

And she was plucking strawberries: and there
In the cool shadow of the elm their boys,
Their baby-boys, were sleeping quietly . . .

But she was aching too: her head and back
Were one hot blinding ache; and dizzily
Sometimes across her eyes the light swam black
With dancing spots of red . . .

STRAWBERRIES

So ripe and sweet
Among their fresh green leaves the strawberries
lay,
Although the earth was baking in the heat,
Burning her soles—and yet the summer day
Was young enough!

If she could only cram
A handful of fresh berries sweet and cool
Into his mouth, while he . . .

A red light swam
Before her eyes . . .

She mustn't think, poor fool,
What he'd be doing now, or she'd go crazed . . .
Then what would happen to them left alone—
The little lads!

And he would be fair mazed,
When he came back, to see how they had
grown,
William and Dick, and how they talked. Two
year,

Since he had gone—and he had never set
His eyes upon his youngest son. 'Twas queer
To think he hadn't seen his baby yet,—
And it nigh fourteen months old.

Everything
Was queer in these days. She could never guess
How it had come about that he could bring
Himself to go and fight. 'Twas little less
Than murder to have taken him, and he
So mild and easy-tempered, never one
For drink or picking quarrels hastily . . .

LIVELIHOOD

And now he would be fighting in that sun . . .
'Twas quite beyond her. Yet, somehow, it seemed
He'd got to go. She couldn't understand . . .
When they had married, little had they dreamed
What things were coming to! In all the land
There was no gentler husband . . .

It was queer:
She couldn't get the rights of it, no way.
She thought and thought, but couldn't get it
clear

Why he'd to leave his own work—making hay
'Twould be this weather—leave his home, and
all—

His wife and his young family, and go
To fight in foreign lands, and maybe fall,
Fighting another lad he didn't know,
And had no quarrel with . . .

The world was mad,
Or she was going crazy. Anyhow
She couldn't see the rights of it . . . Her lad
Had thought it right to go, she knew . . .

But now
She mustn't think about it all . . . And so
She'd best stop puzzling, and pluck strawberries . . .

And every woman plucking in the row
Had husband, son, or brother overseas.

Men seemed to see things differently: and still
She wondered sore if even they knew why
They went themselves, almost against their will . . .

STRAWBERRIES

But sure enough, that was her baby's cry.
'Twas feeding time: and she'd be glad to rest
Her back a bit. It always gave her ease,
To feel her baby feeding at her breast,
And pluck to go on gathering strawberries.

THE BLAST-FURNACE

And such a night! But maybe in that mood
'Twas for the best; for he was like to brood—
And he could hardly brood on such a night
With that squall blowing, on this dizzy height
Where he caught every breath of it—the snow
Stinging his cheek, and melting in the glow
Above the furnace, big white flakes that fell
Sizzling upon the red-hot furnace bell:
And the sea roaring, down there in the dark,
So loud to-night he needn't stop to hark—
Four hundred feet below where now he stood.
A lively place to earn a livelihood—
His livelihood, his mother's, and the three
Young sisters', quite a little family
Depending on him now—on him, Jim Burn,
Just nineteen past—to work for them, and earn
Money enough to buy them daily bread
Already . . .

 And his father on the bed
At home . . . gey sudden . . .

 Nay, he mustn't think:
But shove his trolley to the furnace brink,
And tip his load upon the glowing bell,
Then back again towards the hoist. 'Twas well
He'd work to stop him thinking. He was glad
His mate to-night was not a talky lad—
But Peter, mum-glum Peter, who would stare

THE BLAST-FURNACE

With such queer sulky looks upon the fire
When round the dipping bell it shot up high
With roar and flourish into that black sky.
He liked to hear it roaring, liked to see
The great flame leaping skyward suddenly,
Then sinking slowly, as the bell rose up
And covered it again with red-hot cup,
When it would feed more quiet for a time
Upon the meal of ironstone and lime
He'd fetched it in his trolley . . .

Ay, and he,
Trundling his truck along that gallery
High in the air all night to keep it fed—
And all the while his father lying dead
At home—to learn a livelihood. 'Twas strange
To think what it all meant to him—the change . . .

And strange he'd never thought before how
queer

It was for him, earning his bread up here
On this blast-furnace, perched on the cliff-
top—

Four hundred feet or so, a dizzy drop,
And he'd be feeding fishes in the sea!
How loud it roared to-night, and angrily—
He liked to hear it breaking on the shore,
And the wind's threshing, and the furnace' roar:
And then the sudden quiet, a dead lull,
When you could only hear a frightened gull
Screeching down in the darkness there below,
Or a dog's yelp from the valley, or the snow

LIVELIHOOD

Sizzling upon hot iron. Queer, indeed,
To think that he had never taken heed
Before to-night, or thought about it all.

He'd been a boy till this, and had no call
To turn his mind to thinking seriously.
But he'd grown up since yesterday; and he
Must think a man's thoughts now—since yesterday
When he'd not had a thought but who should play
Full-back for Cleveland Rovers, now that Jack
Had gone to Montreal, or should he back
Old Girl or Cleopatra for the Cup.

In four-and-twenty hours he had grown up . . .
His father, sinking back there on the bed,
With glassy eyes and helpless lolling head . . .
The dropping jaw . . . the breath that didn't
 come,
Though still he listened for it, frozen numb . . .

And then, his mother . . . but he must not let
His mind run on his mother now. And yet
He'd often thought his father glum and grim.
He understood now. It was not for him,
His son, to breathe a word to her, when he,
Her husband, had borne with her patiently
Through all those years. Ay, now he understood
Much, since he hadn't his own livelihood
To think of only, but five mouths to feed—
And the oldest, the most helpless . . . He had
 need

THE BLAST-FURNACE

To understand a little . . .

But to-night

He mustn't brood . . . And what a golden light
The steady spurt of molten slag below
Threw up upon the snow-clouds—and the snow
Drifting down through it in great flakes of gold,
Melting to steam, or driven, white and cold,
Into the darkness on a sudden gust.
And how the cold wind caught him, as he thrust
His empty trolley back towards the hoist,
Straight from the sea, making his dry lips moist
With salty breath.

'Twas strange to-night, how he
Was noticing, and seeing suddenly
Things for the first time he'd not seen before,
Though he'd been on this shift at least a score
Of times. But things were different somehow.

Strange

To think his father's death had wrought the
change
And made him see things different—little things:
The sudden flashing of a sea-gull's wings
Out of the dark, bewildered by the glare;
And, when the flame leapt, mum-glum Peter's hair
Kindling a fierier red; the wind; the snow;
The unseen washing of the waves below
About the cliff-foot. He could almost see,
In fancy, breakers, frothing furiously
Against the crumbling cliffs—the frantic spray
Leaping into the darkness, nigh half-way
Up the sheer height.

LIVELIHOOD

And now his thoughts dropt back
Into the valley, lying still and black
Behind him—and the mine where other men
Were toiling on their nightshift, even then
Working the ironstone for daily bread,
Their livelihood . . .

He saw the little red
Raw row of square brick houses, dark they'd be
And quiet now. Yet, plainly he could see
The street he lived in—ay, and Number Eight,
His father's house: the rusty iron gate;
The unkempt garden; and the blistered door;
The unwashed doorstep he'd not seen before,
Or, leastways, hadn't noticed; and the bell
That never rang, though he remembered well
His father'd tinkered it, times out of mind;
And in each window, a drawn yellow blind
Broken and grimy—and that blind, to-day
Drawn down for the first time . . .

His father lay
In the front bedroom, quiet on the bed . . .
And he, upon his usual shift . . .

She'd said,
His mother'd said; he shouldn't take his shift
Before the undertaker'd been to lift . . .
'Twas scarcely decent: that was what she said—
Him working, and his father lying dead,
And hardly cold . . .

And she, to talk to him,
His son, of decency, there, with that grim
Half-smile still on her husband's cold white face!

THE BLAST-FURNACE

He couldn't bide a moment in the place
Listening to her chat-chatter, knowing all
That he knew now . . . But there, he had no call
To blame her, when his father'd never blamed.
He wondered in that room she wasn't shamed . . .

She didn't understand. He understood,
Now he'd grown up; and had his livelihood,
And theirs, to earn . . .

Lord, but that was a rare
Fine flourish the flame made, a bonnie flare
Leaping up to the stars. The snow had stopt:
He hadn't heeded: and the wind had dropt
Suddenly: and the stars were shining clear.
Over the furnace' roaring he could hear
The waves wash-washing; and could see the foam
Lifting and falling down there in the gloam . . .
White as his father's face . . .

He'd never heard
His father murmur once—nay, not a word
He'd muttered: he was never one to blame.
And men had got to take things as they came.

IN THE MEADOW

The smell of wet hay in the heat
All morning steaming round him rose,
As, in a kind of nodding doze,
Perched on the hard and jolting seat,
He drove the rattling jangling rake
Round and around the Five Oaks Mead.
With that old mare he scarcely need
To drive at all or keep awake.
Gazing with half-shut, sleepy eyes
At her white flanks and grizzled tail
That flicked and flicked without avail,
To drive away the cloud of flies
That hovered, closing and unclosing,
A shimmering hum and humming shimmer,
Dwindling dim and ever dimmer
In his dazzled sight, till, dozing,
He seemed to hear a murmuring stream
And gaze into a rippling pool
Beneath thick branches dark and cool—
And gazing, gazing till a gleam
Within the darkness caught his eyes,
He saw there smiling up at him
A young girl's face, now rippling dim,
Now flashing clear . . .

Without surprise

He marked the eyes translucent blue,
The full red lips that seemed to speak,
The curves of rounded chin and cheek,

IN THE MEADOW

The low, broad brow, sun-tanned . . .

He knew

That face, yet could not call to mind
Where he had seen it; and in vain
Strove to recall . . . when sudden rain
Crashed down and made the clear pool blind,
And it was lost . . .

And, with a jerk
That well-nigh shook him from his seat,
He wakened to the steamy heat
And clank and rattle.

Still at work
The stolid mare kept on; and still
Over her hot, white flanks the flies
Hung humming. And his dazzled eyes
Closed gradually again, until
He dozed . . .

And stood within the door
Of Dinchill dairy, drinking there
Thirst-quenching draughts of stone-cold air—
The scoured white shelves and sanded floor
And shallow milk-pans creamy-white
Gleamed coldly in the dusky light . . .
And then he saw her, stooping down
Over a milk-pan, while her eyes
Looked up at him without surprise
Over the shoulder of her gown—
Her fresh print gown of speedwell blue . . .
The eyes that looked out of the cool
Untroubled crystal of the pool
Looked into his again.

LIVELIHOOD

He knew
Those eyes now . . .
From his dreamy doze
A sudden jolting of the rake
Aroused him.

Startled broad awake
He sat upright, lost in amaze
That he should dream of her—that lass!—
And see her face within the pool!

He'd known her always. Why, at school
They'd sat together in the class.
He'd always liked her well enough,
Young Polly Dale—and they had played
At Prisoners' Base and Who's Afraid,
At Tiggy and at Blindman's Buff,
A hundred times together . . .

Ay,
He'd always known her . . . It was strange,
Though he had noticed that a change
Had come upon her—she was shy,
And quieter, since she left school
And put her hair up—he'd not seen
Her face, till from the glancing sheen
It looked up at him from the pool . . .

He'd always known her. Every day,
He'd nod to her as they would pass.
He'd always known her, as a lass . . .
He'd never know her just that way
Again now . . .

IN THE MEADOW

In a different wise
They'd meet—for how could he forget
His dream . . . The next time that they met
He'd look into a woman's eyes.

PARTNERS

He'd got to see it through. Ay, that was plain—
Plain as the damning figures on that page
Which burnt and bit themselves into his brain
Since he'd first lighted on them—such an age
Since he'd first lighted on them! though the
clock

Had only ticked one hour out—its white face
And black hands counting time alone—

The shock

Had dropped him out of time and out of space
Into the dead void of eternity,
Lightless and aching, where his soul hung dead
With wide set staring eyes that still could see
Those damning figures burning hugely red
On the low aching dome of the black heaven
That crushed upon his temples—glaring bright—
10,711—
Searing his eyeballs . . .

Yet his living sight

Was fixed on the white ledger, while he sat
Before his office-table in his chair—
The chair he'd taken when he'd hung his hat
Within the cupboard door, and brushed his
hair,
And stood a moment, humming "Chevy Chase,"
His hands beneath his coat-tails, by the grate,

PARTNERS

Warming his back, and thinking of a case
They'd won outright with costs, and . . .

Phil was late:

But Phil was Phil. At home they used to call
His brother "Better-late." At every turn
He'd had to wait for Phil. And after all
There wasn't so much doing, now that concern . . .

And little thinking anything was wrong,
Laying his hand upon his own armchair
To draw it out, still humming the old song,
He'd seen the note from Philip lying there
Upon the open ledger.

Once, he read

The truth, unrealising, and again.
But only two words echoed through his head,
And buzzed uncomprehended in his brain—
"Embezzled" and "absconded."

Phil had spelt

His shame out boldly in his boyish hand.
And then those figures . . .

Dizzily he felt

The truth burn through him. He could hardly
stand,

But sank into his chair with eyes set wide
Upon those damning figures, murmuring "Phil!"
And listening to the whirr of wheels outside,
And sparrows cheeping on the window-sill—
Still murmuring "Phil! Poor Phil!"

But Phil was gone:

And he was left alone to bear the brunt . . .

LIVELIHOOD

“Phil! Little Phil!”

And still the morning shone
Bright at the window . . .

Callous, curt and blunt
The world would call his brother . . . not that
name!

And yet names mattered little at this pass.
He'd known that Phil was slack . . . but this!

The blame
Was his as much as Phil's. As in a glass
Darkly, he saw he'd been to blame as well:
And he would bear the blame. Had he not known
That Phil was slack? For all that he could tell,
If he'd looked after Phil, this might . . .

Alone
He'd got to face the music. He was glad
He was alone . . . And yet, for Phil's own sake
If he had only had the pluck, poor lad,
To see the thing through like a man, and take
His punishment!

For him, was no escape,
Either by Phil's road, or that darker road.
He knew the cost, and how the thing would
shape—

Too well he knew the full weight of the load
He strapped upon his shoulders. It was just
That he should bear the burden on his back.
He'd trusted Phil; and he'd no right to trust
Even his brother, knowing he was slack,
When other people's money was at stake.
He'd, too, been slack: and slackness was a crime—

LIVELIHOOD

Rambling the hills of home that April day,
Stumbling and plunging knee-deep through the
heather

Towards Hallypike, the little lough that lay
Glancing and gleaming in the sun, to search
For eggs of inland-breeding gulls. He heard
The curlews piping; saw a blackcock perch
Upon a dyke hard-by—a lordly bird
With queer curled tail. And soon they reached the
edge—

The quaggy edge of Hallypike. And then
The gulls rose at them screaming from the edge
With flapping wings. And for a while like men
They stood their ground among the quaking moss,
Until half-blinded by the dazzling white
Of interweaving wings, and at a loss
Which way to turn, they only thought of flight
From those fierce cruel beaks and hungry eyes—
Yet stood transfixed, each on a quaking clump,
With hands to ears to shut out those wild cries.
Then the gulls closed on Phil; and with a jump
And one shrill yell he'd plunged into the lake
Half-crazed with terror. Only just in time
He'd stumbled after through the quag aquake
And caught him by the coat; and through black
slime

Had dragged him into safety, far away
From the horror of white wings and beaks and
eyes.

And he remembered now how Philip lay
Sobbing upon his bosom . . .

PARTNERS

Now those cries
Were threatening Phil again; and he was caught
Blind in a beating, baffling, yelling hell
Of wings and beaks and eyes. And there was naught
That he could do for him . . .

Once more he fell
Into the dead void of eternity,
Lightless and aching, and his soul hung dead
With wide set staring eyes that still could see
Those damning figures, burning hugely red
On the low aching dome of the black heaven
That crushed upon his temples—glaring bright—
10,711
Searing his eyeballs . . . Then the pitchy night
Rolled by . . .

And now that summer noon they
sat
In the shallows of Broomlee lake, the water warm
About their chins, and talked of this and that;
And heeded nothing of the coming storm,
Or the strange breathless stillness everywhere
On which the dull note of the cuckoo fell
Monotonously beating through dead air,
A throbbing pulse of heat made audible.
And even when the sky was brooding gray
They'd slowly dressed, and started to walk round
The mile-long lake: but when they'd got half-way,
A heavy fear fell on them; and they found
That they were clutching hands. The still lough
gleamed
Livid before them 'neath a livid sky

LIVELIHOOD

Sleek and unrippling . . . Suddenly they screamed
And ran headlong for home they knew not
why—

Ran stumbling through the heath, and never
stopped—

And still hot brooding horror on them pressed
When they had climbed up Sewingshields, and
dropped

Dead-beat beneath the dyke. And on his breast
Poor frightened Phil had sobbed himself to sleep.

And even when the crashing thunder came,
Phil snuggled close in slumber sound and deep.
And he alone had watched the lightning flame
Across the fells, and flash on Hallypike . . .

And in his office chair, he felt once more
His back against the sharp stones of the dyke,
And Phil's hot clutching arms . . .

An outer door
Banged in the wind, and roused him . . .

He was glad,
In spite of all, to think he'd trusted Phil.
He'd got to see it through . . .

He saw the lad,
His little frightened brother crouching still
Beneath the brooding horror of the sky.
That he might take him in his arms once more!

Now, he must pull himself together, ay!
For there was someone tapping at the door.

THE ELM

The wind had caught the elm at last.
He'd lain all night and wondered how
'Twas bearing up against the blast:
And it was down for ever now,
Snapt like a match-stick. He, at dawn,
Had risen from his sleepless bed,
And, hobbling to the window, drawn
The blind up, and had seen, instead
Of that brave tree against the sky,
Thrust up into the windless blue
A broken stump not ten feet high . . .

And it was changed, the world he knew,
The world he'd known since he, tip-toe,
Had first looked out beneath the eaves,
And seen that tree at dawn, aglow,
Soaring with all its countless leaves
In their first glory of fresh green,
Like a big flame above the mead.

How many mornings he had seen
It soaring since—well, it would need
A better head to figure out
Than his, now he was seventy-five,
And failing fast without a doubt—
The last of fifteen, left alive,
That in that very room were born,
Ay, and upon that very bed
He'd left at daybreak.

LIVELIHOOD

Many a morn
He'd seen it, stark against the red
Of winter sunrise, or in Spring—
Some April morning, dewy-clear,
With all its green buds glittering
In the first sunbeams, soaring sheer
Out of low mist.

The morn he wed
It seemed with glittering jewels hung . . .

And fifty year, his wife was dead—
And she, so merry-eyed and young . . .

And it was black the night she died,
Dead black against the starry sky,
When he had flung the window wide
Upon the night so crazily,
Instead of drawing down the blind
As he had meant. He was so dazed,
And fumbled so, he couldn't find
The hasp to pull it to, though crazed
To shut them out, that starry night,
And that great funeral-plume of black,
So awful in the cold starlight.
He'd fumbled till they drew him back,
And closed it for him . . .

And for long
At night he couldn't bear to see
An elm against the stars.

'Twas wrong,
He knew, to blame an innocent tree—

THE ELM

Though some folk hated elms, and thought
Them evil: for their great boughs fell
So suddenly . . .

George Stubbs was caught
And crushed to death. You couldn't tell
What brought that great bough crashing there,
Just where George sat—his cider-keg
Raised to his lips—for all the air
Was still as death . . . And just one leg
Stuck silly-like out of the leaves,
When Seth waked up ten yards away
Where he'd been snoozing 'mid the sheaves.

'Twas queer-like; but you couldn't say
The tree itself had been to blame.
That bough was rotten through and through,
And would have fallen just the same
Though George had not been there . . .

'Twas true

That undertakers mostly made
Cheap coffins out of elm . . .

But he,

Well, he could never feel afraid
Of any living thing. That tree,
He'd seemed to hate it for a time
After she'd died . . . And yet somehow
You can't keep hating without rhyme
Or reason any live thing.

Now

He grieved to see it, fallen low,
With almost every branch and bough

LIVELIHOOD

Smashed into splinters. All that snow,
A dead-weight, and that heavy blast,
Had dragged it down: and at his feet
It lay, the mighty tree, at last.

And he could make its trunk his seat
And rest awhile, this winter's noon
In the warm sunshine. He could just
Hobble so far. And very soon
He'd lie as low himself. He'd trust
His body to that wood.

Old tree,
So proud and brave this many a year,
Now brought so low . . .

Ah! there was he,
His grandson, Jo, with never a fear
Riding a bough unbroken yet—
A madcap, like his father, Jim!
He'd teach him sense, if he could get
Behind him with a stick, the limb!

THE DOCTOR

He'd soon be home. The car was running well,
Considering what she'd been through, since the
bell

Tumbled him out again—just as his head
Sank in the pillow, glad to get to bed
After the last night's watching, and a day
Of travelling snowy roads without a stay—
To find the tall young shepherd at the door.

“The wife's gey bad in child-bed”—and no more
He'd said till they were seated in the car,
And he was asked, Where to? and was it far?
“The Scalp” he'd said—“Some fifteen mile or so.”

And they'd set out through blinding squalls of snow
To climb the hills. The car could scarcely crawl
At times, she skidded so; and with that squall
Clean in his eyes he scarcely saw to steer—
His big lamps only lit a few yards clear—

But those young eyes beside him seemed to pierce
The fifteen miles of smother fuming fierce
Between the husband and his home—the light
In that far bedroom window held his sight,
As though he saw clean through the blinding squall
To the little square stone steading that held all
His heart—so solitary, bleak and grey
Among the snow drifts on the windy brae,

LIVELIHOOD

Beyond the burn that, swollen, loud and black
Threatened the single plank that kept the track
Between them and the outside world secure.
If that were gone, when he got back, for sure
They'd have to plunge waist-deep in that black
spate
And cling for life upon the old sheep-gate,
If it were not gone too, to cross at all . . .

And she! He saw the shadow on the wall
Behind the bed, his mother's as she bent
To comfort Mary, for a moment spent
By the long agony . . . That shadow seemed
So black and threatening, and the candle gleamed
So strangely in those wild bright eyes . . .
They'd be
Lucky to reach the bank at all: for he
Had been through that burn once on such a
night:
And he remembered how he'd had to fight
The frothing flood, rolled over, beaten, bruised
And well-nigh dragged down under, though well
used
To every mood and temper of the burn.

Yet, though he gazed so far, he missed no turn
In all those climbing miles of snow-blind way
Until the car stopt dead by Gallows' Brae,
And they'd to leave her underneath a dyke,
And plunge knee-deep through drift-choked slack
and syke

THE DOCTOR

Until they reached the plank that still held fast
Though quivering underfoot in that wild blast
Like a stretched bow-string. Dizzily they crossed
Above that brawling blackness, torn and tossed
To flashing spray about the lantern. Then
Setting their teeth, they took the brae, like men
At desperate hazard charging certain death:
And nigh the crest the doctor reeled—his breath
Knocked out of him, and sinking helplessly
Knew nothing till he wakened drowsily
Before the peat and found himself alone
In a strange kitchen.

But a heavy moan
Just overhead recalled him, and he leapt
Instantly to his feet, alert, and crept
Upstairs with noiseless step until he came
To the low bedroom where the candle flame
Showed the old woman standing by the bed
On which the young wife lay. His noiseless tread
Scarce startling them, he paused a moment while
Those strained white lips and wild eyes strove to
smile

Bravely and tenderly as the husband bent
Over the bed to kiss her. When he went
Without a word, closing the creaking door
And creeping quietly downstairs, once more
The room was filled with moaning.

.

When at last
His part was done, and danger safely past,

LIVELIHOOD

And into a wintry world with lusty crying
That little life had ventured, and was lying
Beside the drowsy mother on the bed,
Downstairs the doctor stole with noiseless tread,
And, entering the kitchen quietly,
Saw the young father gazing fearfully
Into the fire with dazed unseeing eyes.
He spoke to him: and still he did not rise,
But sat there staring with that senseless gaze
Set on the peat that with a sudden blaze
Lit up his drawn face, bloodless 'neath its tan.
But when the doctor stooped and touched the man
Upon the shoulder, starting to his feet
He staggered, almost falling in the peat,
Whispering "She's safe! She's safe!"

And then he leapt
Suddenly up the stair. The doctor crept
Speedily after him without a sound:
But when he reached the upper room he found
He wasn't needed. The young husband bent
Over his wife and baby, quiet, content:
Then the wife stirred, opening her eyes, and
smiled
And they together looked upon their child.
The doctor drowsed till dawn beside the peat,
Napping uneasily in the high-backed seat,
Half-conscious of the storm that shook the
pane
And rattled at the door . . .

And now again
He seemed to stand beside the lonely bed

THE DOCTOR

He'd stood beside last night—the old man,
dead,

With staring eyes, dropt jaw, and rigid grin
That held the stark white features, peaked and
thin—

The old man, left alone, with not a friend
To make his body seemly in the end,
Or close his eyes . . .

And then the lusty cry
Of that young baby screaming hungrily
Broke through his dream. . . .

.

The car was running well.
He'd soon be home, and sleeping—till the bell
Should rouse him to a world of old men dying
Alone, and hungry newborn babies crying.

THE LAMP

She couldn't bring herself to bar the door—
And him on the wrong side of it. Nevermore
She'd hear his footstep on the threshold-
stone . . .

“You're not afraid to lie all night alone,
And Jim but newly drowned?” they'd asked: and
she
Had turned upon her neighbours wonderingly.
“Afraid of what?” she said. “Afraid of him;”
The neighbours answered. “Me—afraid of Jim!
And after all these years!” she cried—“and he—
How can you think that he'd bring harm to me?
You know him better, surely, even you!
And I . . .” Then they had left her, for they knew
Too well that any word that they could say
Would help her nothing.

When they'd gone away,
Leaving her to her trouble, she arose,
And, taking from the kist his Sunday clothes,
Folded so neatly, kept so carefully
In camphor, free of moth, half-absently
She shook them out, and hung them up to air
Before the fire upon his high-backed chair:

THE LAMP

And then when they were aired she folded them
Carefully, seam to seam and hem to hem,
And smoothing them with tender hands, again
She laid them in the kist where they had lain
Six days a week for hard on forty year . . .

Ay, forty year they'd shared each hope and fear—
They two, together—yet she might not tend
With loving hands his body in the end.
The sea had taken him from her. And she—
She could do nothing for him now. The sea
Had taken him from her. And nevermore
Might she do anything for him . . .

The door

Flapped in the wind. She shut and snecked it
tight,
But did not bolt it. Then she set a light
In the white-curtained window, where it shone
As clearly as on each night that he had gone
Out with the boats in all that forty year,
And each night she had watched it burning clear,
Alone and wakeful . . . and, though lonelier,
She'd lie to-night as many a night she'd lain
On her left side, with face turned towards the
pane,
So that, if she should wake, at once she'd see
If still her beacon-light burned steadily,
Feeling that, may be, somewhere in the night
Of those dark waters he could see the light
Far off and very dim, a little spark
Of comfort burning for him in the dark,

LIVELIHOOD

And, even though it should dwindle from his sight,
It seemed to her that he must feel the light
Burning within his heart, the light of home . . .

From those black cruel waters sudden foam
Flashed as she gazed; and with a shuddering stir,
As though cold drowning waves went over her,
She stood a moment gasping. Then she turned
From the bright window where her watch-light
burned

And, taking off her clothes, crept into bed
To see if she could sleep. But when her head
Touched the cold pillow, such hot restlessness
She felt, she'd half-a-mind to rise and dress
Each moment, as she tossed from side to side.
The bed to-night seemed very big and wide
And hard and cold to her, though a hot ache
Held her whole body tingling wide awake
Turning and tossing half the endless night.

Then quieter she lay, and watched the light
Burning so steadily, until the flame
Dazzled her eyes, and golden memories came
Out of the past to comfort her. She lay
Remembering,—remembering that day
Nigh twenty years since when she'd thought him
drowned,
And after all . . .

She heard again the sound
Of seas that swept a solid wall of green,
Such seas as living eye had never seen,

THE LAMP

Over the rock-bound harbour, with a roar
Rushing the beach, tossing against the door
Driftwood and old cork-floats, slashing the pane
With flying weed again and yet again,
As toppling to disaster, sea on sea
Beneath that crashing wind broke furiously
Almost upon the very threshold-stone
In white tumultuous thunder. All alone
She watched through that long morn: too much
afraid

To stir or do a hand's turn, her heart prayed
One prayer unceasingly, though not a word
Escaped her lips; till in a lull she heard
A neighbour call out that the Morning Star
Had gone ashore somewhere beyond Hell Scar,
Hard by the Wick, and all . . . and then the roar
Drowned everything. . . .

And how she reached the door
She never knew. She found herself outside
Suddenly face to face with that mad tide,
Battling for breach against a wind that fought
Each inch with her, as she turned North, and
caught

Her bodily, and flung her reeling back
A dozen times before she reached the track
That runs along the crag-top to the Head.
Bent double, still she struggled on, half-dead,
For not a moment could she stand upright
Against that wind, striving with all her might
To reach the Wick. She struggled through that wind
As through cold clinging water, deaf and blind;

LIVELIHOOD

And numb and heavy in that icy air
Her battered body felt, as though, stark-bare,
She floundered in deep seas. Once in a lull
Flat on her face she fell. A startled gull
Rose skirling at her; and with burning eyes
She lay a moment, far too scared to rise,
Staring into a gully, black as night,
In which the seething waters frothing white
Thundered from crag to crag, and baffled leapt
A hundred feet in air. She'd nearly stept
Into that gully. Just in time the wind
Had dropt. One moment more, and headlong,
blind,
She'd tumbled into that pit of death . . . and Jim,
If he were living yet . . .

The thought of him
Startled her to her feet: and on once more
Against a fiercer wind along the shore
She struggled with set teeth, and dragging hair
Drenched in the sousing spray that leapt in air
Spinning and hissing, smiting her like hail.

Then when it almost seemed that she must fail
To reach the Wick, alive or dead, she found
That she was there already. To the ground
She sank, dead-beat. Almost too faint and weak
To lift her head, her wild eyes sought the creek;
But there she saw no sign of boat or man—
Only a furious smother of seas that ran
Along the slanting jetty ceaselessly.
Groping for life, she searched that spumy sea

THE LAMP

For sail or sign in vain: then knew no more . . .
Till she was lifted by strong arms that bore
Her safely through the storm, lying at rest
Without a care upon her husband's breast
Unquestioning, till she reached home, content
To feel his arms about her, as he bent
Over her tenderly and breathed her name.

And then she heard how, back from death, he
came
Unscathed to her, by some strange mercy thrown
Alive almost upon his threshold-stone:
When, hearing where she'd gone, he'd followed her
Hot-foot . . .

The breath of dawn began to blur
The shining pane with mist . . . And nevermore
His foot would follow her along that shore.
The sea had taken him from her, at last,
Had taken him to keep . . .

Then from the past
She waked with eyes that looked beyond the
light,
Still burning clearly, into the lingering night,
Black yet, beyond the streaming window-pane
Down which big glistening drops of gentle rain
Trickled until they dazzled her; and she lay
Again remembering—how ere break of day
When she was young she'd had to rise and go
Along the crag-top some five mile or so,
With other lads and lasses, to Skateraw
To gather bait . . .

LIVELIHOOD

Again her young eyes saw
Those silent figures with their creels, dead-black
Against the stars, climbing the sheer cliff-track
In single file before her, or quite bright
As suddenly the light-house flashed its light
Full on them, stepping up out of the night
On to the day-bright crag-top—kindling white,
A moment, windy hair and streaming grass.
Again she trudged, a drowsy little lass,
The youngest of them all, across dim fields
By sleeping farms and ruined roofless fields,
Frightened by angry dogs that, roused from sleep,
Yelped after them, or by a startled sheep
That scurried by her suddenly, while she
Was staring at a ship's lights out at sea,
With dreaming eyes, or counting countless stars
That twinkled bright beyond the jagged scars:
Or stumbled over a slippery shingle-beach
Beneath her creel, and shuddered at the screech
And sudden clamour of wings that round her
flapped.

Again she felt that cruel cold. Though hapt
In the big shawl, the raw wind searched her
through
Till every bone ached. Then once more she
knew
Brief respite when at last they reached Skateraw
And rested till the dawn.

Again she saw
Those dark groups sitting quiet in the night
Awaiting the first blink of morning-light,

THE LAMP

To set to work gathering the bait, while she
Sang to them as they sat beside the sea.
They always made her sing, for she'd a voice
When she was young, she had, and such a choice
Of words and airs by heart: and she was glad
To turn a tune for any lass or lad
Who'd ask her, always glad to hear them say:
"Come, Singing Sally, give us 'Duncan Gray,'
'The De'il among the Tailors,' 'Elsie Marley,'
'The Keel-Row' or 'The Wind among the Bar-
ley'";
And always gladdest when 'twas Jim would ask.

Again, as they would settle to their task
Of gathering clammy mussels, that cold ache
Stole through her bones. It seemed her back must
break
Each time she stooped, or lifted up her head,
Though still she worked with fingers raw and
red
Until her creel was filled. But, toiling back,
Staggering beneath her load along the track,
Jim would come up with her and take her creel
And bear it for her, if she'd sing a reel
To keep their hearts up as they trudged along.
Half-numb with sleep, she'd start a dancing-song,
And sing, the fresh wind blowing in her face,
Until the dancing blood began to race
Through her young body, and her heart grew
light,
Forgetting all the labours of the night . . .

LIVELIHOOD

Once more she walked light-foot to that gay air,
The wind of morning fresh on face and hair,
A girl again . . .

And Jim, 'twas always he
Who bore her burden for her . . .

Quietly
With eyes upon the golden lamp she lay,
While, all unseen of her, the winter day
Behind the dim wet pane broke bleak and
cold.

She seemed to look upon a dawn of gold
That kindled every dancing wave to glee
As she walked homeward singing by the sea,
As she walked homeward with the windy stir
Fresh in her flying hair, and over her
Jim leant—young lucky Jim—a kindly lad
Taking the creel; and her girl's heart was
glad

As . . .

. . . clasped within each other's arms, the
deep
Closed over them . . .

Smiling, she fell asleep.

THE PLATELAYER

Tapping the rails as he went by
And driving the slack wedges tight,
He walked towards the morning sky
Between two golden lines of light
That dwindled slowly into one
Sheer golden rail that ran right on
Over the fells into the sun.

And dazzling in his eyes it shone,
That golden track, as left and right
He swung his clinking hammer—ay,
'Twas dazzling after that long night
In Hindfell tunnel, working by
A smoky flare, and making good
The track the rains had torn . . .

Clink, clink,

On the sound metal—on the wood
A duller thwack!

It made him blink,

That running gold . . .

'Twas sixteen hours

Since he'd left home—his garden smelt
So fragrant with the heavy showers
When he left home— and now he felt
That it would smell more fresh and sweet

LIVELIHOOD

After the tunnel's reek and fume
Of damp warm cinders. 'Twas a treat
To come upon the scent and bloom
That topped the cutting by the wood
After the cinders of the track,
The cinders and tarred sleepers—good
To lift your eyes from gritty black
Upon that blaze of green and red . . .
And she'd be waiting by the fence,
And with the baby . . .

Straight for bed

He'd make, if he had any sense,
And sleep the day; but, like as not,
When he'd had breakfast, he'd turn to
And hoe the back potato-plot:
'Twould be one mass of weeds he knew.
You'd think each single drop of rain
Turned as it fell into a weed.
You seemed to hoe and hoe in vain.
Chickweed and groundsel didn't heed
The likes of him—and bindweed, well,
You hoed and hoed—still its white roots
Ran deeper . . .

'Twould be good to smell
The fresh turned earth, and feel his boots
Sink deep into the brown wet mould,
After hard cinders . . .

And, maybe,
The baby, sleeping good as gold
In its new carriage under a tree,
Would keep him company, while his wife

THE PLATELAYER

Washed up the breakfast-things.

'Twas strange,
The difference that she made to life,
That tiny baby-girl.

The change
Of work would make him sleep more sound.
'Twas sleep he needed. That long night
Shovelling wet cinders underground,
With breaking back, the smoky light
Stinging his eyes till they were sore . . .
He'd worked the night that she was born,
Standing from noon the day before
All through that winter's night till morn
Laying fog-signals on the line
Where it ran over Devil's Ghyll . . .

And she was born at half-past nine,
Just as he stood aside until
The Scots Express ran safely by . . .
He'd but to shut his eyes to see
Those windows flashing blindingly
A moment through the blizzard—he
Could feel again that slashing snow
That seemed to cut his face.

But they,
The passengers, they couldn't know
What it cost him to keep the way
Open for them. So snug and warm
They slept or chattered, while he stood
And faced all night that raking storm—
The little house beside the wood

LIVELIHOOD

Forever in his thoughts: and he,
Not knowing what was happening . . .
But all went well as well could be
With Sally and the little thing.
And it had been worth while to wait
Through that long night with work to do,
To meet his mother at the gate
With such good news, and find it true,
Ay, truer than the truth.

He still
Could see his wife's eyes as he bent
Over the bairn . . .

The Devil's Ghyll
Had done its worst, and he was spent;
But he'd have faced a thousand such
Wild nights as thon, to see that smile
Again, and feel that tender touch
Upon his cheek.

'Twas well worth while
With such reward. And it was strange,
The difference such a little thing
Could make to them—how it could change
Their whole life for them, and could bring
Such happiness to them, though they
Had seemed as happy as could be
Before it came to them.

The day
Was shaping well. And there was she,
The lassie sleeping quietly
Within her arms, beside the gate.
The storm had split that lilac tree.
But he was tired, and it must wait.

MAKESHIFTS

And after all, 'twas snug and weather-tight,
His garret. That was much on such a night—
To be secure against the wind and sleet
At his age, and not wandering the street,
A shuffling, shivering bag-of-bones.

And yet
Things would be snugger if he could forget
The bundle of old dripping rags that slouched
Before him down the Cannongate, and crouched
Close to the swing-doors of the Spotted Cow.
Why, he could see that poor old sinner now,
Ay! and could draw him, if he'd had the knack
Of drawing anything—a steamy, black
Dilapidation, basking in the glare,
And sniffing with his swollen nose in air
To catch the hot reek when the door swings
wide
And shows the glittering paradise inside,
Where men drink golden fire on seats of plush
Lolling like gods: he stands there in the slush
Shivering, from squelching boots to sopping hat
One sodden clout, and blinking like a bat
Be-dazzled by the blaze of light: his beard
Waggles and drips from lank cheeks pocked and
seared;
And the whole dismal night about him drips,
As he stands gaping there with watering lips

LIVELIHOOD

And burning eyes in the cold sleety drench
Afire with thirst that only death may quench.

Yet he had clutched the sixpence greedily
As if sixpennyworth of rum maybe
Would satisfy that thirst. Who knows! It might
Just do the trick perhaps on such a night,
And death would be a golden, fiery drink
To that old scarecrow. 'Twould be good to think
His money'd satisfied that thirst, and brought
Rest to those restless fevered bones that ought
Long since to have dropped for ever out of
sight.

It wasn't decent, wandering the night
Like that—not decent. While it lived it made
A man turn hot to see it, and afraid
To look it in the face lest he should find
That bundle was himself, grown old and blind
With thirst unsatisfied.

He'd thirsted, too,
His whole life long, though not for any brew
That trickled out of taps in gaudy bars
For those with greasy pence to spend!

The stars
Were not for purchase, neither bought nor sold
By any man for silver or for gold.

Still, he was snug and sheltered from the storm.
He sat by his own hearth secure and warm,
And that was much indeed on such a night.
The little room was pleasant with the light

MAKESHIFTS

Glowing on lime-washed walls, kindling to red
His copper pots, and, over the white bed,
The old torn Rembrandt print to golden gloom.
'Twas much on such a night to have a room—
Four walls and ceiling storm-tight overhead.
Denied the stars—well, you must spend instead
Your sixpences on makeshifts. Life was naught
But toiling for the sixpences that bought
Makeshifts for stars.

'Twas snug to hear the sleet
Lashing the panes and sweeping down the street
Towards Holyrood and out into the night
Of hills beyond. Maybe it would be white
On Arthur's Seat to-morrow, white with snow—
A white hill shining in the morning glow
Beyond the chimney-pots, that was a sight
For any man to see—a snowy height
Soaring into the sunshine. He was glad
Though he must live in slums, his garret had
A window to the hills.

And he was warm,
Ay, warm and snug, shut in here from the storm.
The sixpences bought comfort for old bones
That else must crouch all night on paving-stones
Unsheltered from the cold.

'Twas hard to learn
In his young days that this was life—to earn
By life-long labour just your board and bed—
Although the stars were singing overhead,
The sons of morning singing together for joy
As they had sung for every bright-eyed boy

LIVELIHOOD

With ears to hear since life itself was young—
And leave so much unseen, so much unsung.

He'd had to learn that lesson. 'Twas no good
To go star-gazing for a livelihood
With empty belly. Though he had a turn
For seeing things, when you have got to earn
Your daily bread first, there is little time
To paint your dream or set the stars to rhyme:
Nay, though you have the vision and the
skill

You cannot draw the outline of a hill
To please yourself, when you get home half-
dead

After the day's work—hammers in your head
Still tapping, tapping . . .

Always mad to draw

The living shape of everything he saw
He'd had to spend his utmost skill and strength
Learning a trade to live by, till at length
Now he'd the leisure the old skill was dead.

Born for a painter as it seemed, instead
He'd spent his life upholstering furniture.
'Twas natural enough men should prefer
Upholstery to pictures, and their ease
To little coloured daubs of cows and trees.
He didn't blame them, 'twas no fault of theirs
That they saw life in terms of easy chairs,
And heaven, like that old sinner in the slush,
A glittering bar upholstered in red plush.

MAKESHIFTS

'Twas strange to look back on it now, his life . . .
His father, married to a second wife;
And home, no home for him since he could mind,
Save when the starry vision made him blind
To all about him, and he walked on air
For days together, and without a care . . .
But as the years passed, seldomer they came
Those starry dazzling nights and days aflame,
And oftener a sudden gloom would drop
Upon him, drudging all day in the shop
With his young brother John—John always gay
Taking things as they came, the easy way,
Not minding overmuch if things went wrong
At home, and always humming a new song . . .

And then she came into his life, and shook
All heaven about him. He had but to look
On her to find the stars within his reach.
But, ere his love had trembled into speech,
He'd waked one day to know that not for him
Were those bright living eyes that turned dreams
dim—

To know that while he'd worshipped, John and she
Had taken to each other easily . . .

But that was years ago . . . and now he sat
Beside a lonely hearth. And they were fat—
Ay, fat and old they were, John and his wife,
And with a grown-up family. Their life
Had not been over-easy: they'd their share
Of trouble, ay, more than enough to spare:

LIVELIHOOD

But they had made the best of things, and taken
Life as it came with courage still unshaken.
They'd faced their luck, but never gone half-way
To meet fresh trouble. Life was always gay
For them between the showers: the roughest
weather

Might do its worst—they always stood together
To bear the brunt, together stood their ground
And came through smiling cheerfully. They'd
found

Marriage a hard-up, happy business
Of hand-to-mouth existence more or less;
But taking all in all, well worth their while
To look on the bright side of things—to smile
When all went well, not fearing overmuch
When life was suddenly brought to the touch
And you'd to sink or swim. And they'd kept
hold,

And even now, though they were fat and old
They'd still a hearty grip on life . . .

They'd be

Sitting there in their kitchen after tea
On either side the fire-place even now—
Jane with her spectacles upon her brow,
And nodding as she knitted, listening
While John, in shirt-sleeves, scraped his fiddle-
string,

With one ear hearkening lest a foot should stop
And some rare customer invade the shop
To ask the price of that old Flanders' chest
Or oaken ale-house settle . . .

MAKESHIFTS

They'd the best
Of life, maybe, together . . .

And yet he—
Though he'd not taken life so easily,
Had always hated makeshifts more or less,
Grudging to swop the stars for sixpences,
And was an old man now, with that old thirst
Unsatisfied—ay, even at the worst
He'd had his compensations, now and then
A starry glimpse. You couldn't work with men
And quite forget the stars. Though life was
spent

In drudgery, it hadn't only meant
Upholstering chairs in crimson plush for bars . . .
Maybe it gave new meaning to the stars,
The drudgery, who knows!

At least the rare
Wild glimpses he had caught at whiles were
there

Yet living in his mind. When much was dim
And drudgery forgotten, bright for him
Burned even now in memory old delights
That had been his in other days and nights.
He'd always seen, though never could express
His eyes' delight, or only more or less:
But things once clearly seen, once and for all
The soul's possessions—naught that may befall
May ever dim, and neither moth nor rust
Corrupt the dream, that, shedding mortal dust,
Has soared to life and spread its wings of gold
Within the soul . . .

LIVELIHOOD

And yet when they were told
These deathless visions, little things they seemed
Though something of the beauty he had dreamed
Burned in them, something of his youth's desire . . .

And as he sat there, gazing at the fire—
Once more he lingered, listening in the gloom
Of that great silent warehouse, in the room
Where stores were kept, one hand upon a shelf,
And heard a lassie singing to herself
Somewhere unseen without a thought who heard,
Just singing to herself like any bird
Because the heart was happy in her breast,
As happy as the day was long. At rest
He lingered, listening, and a ray of light
Streamed from the dormer-window up a height;
Down on the bales of crimson cloth, and lit
To sudden gold the dust that danced in it,
Till he was dazzled by the golden motes
That kept on dancing to those merry notes
Before his dreaming eyes, and danced as long
As he stood listening to the lassie's song . . .

Then once again, his work-bag on his back,
He climbed that April morning up the track
That took you by a short cut through the wood
Up to the hill-top where the great house stood,
When suddenly beyond the firs' thick night
He saw a young fawn frisking in the light:
Shaking the dew-drops in a silver rain
From off his dappled hide, he leapt again

MAKESHIFTS

As though he'd jump out of his skin for joy.
With laughing eyes light-hearted as a boy
He watched the creature unaware of him
Quivering with eager life in every limb,
Leaping and frisking on the dewy green
Beneath the flourish of the snowy gean,
While every now and then the long ears pricked,
And budding horns, as he leapt higher, flicked
The drooping clusters of wild-cherry bloom,
Shaking their snow about him. From the gloom
Of those dark wintry firs, his eyes had won
A sight of April sporting in the sun—
Young April leaping to its heart's delight
Among the dew beneath the boughs of white . . .

And there'd been days among the hills, rare
days
And rarer nights among the heathery ways—
Rare golden holidays when he had been
Alone in the great solitude of green
Wave-crested hills, a rolling shoreless sea
Flowing for ever through eternity—
A sea of grasses, streaming without rest
Beneath the great wind blowing from the
west,
Over which cloud shadows sailed and swept
away
Beyond the world's edge all the summer day.

The hills had been his refuge, his delight,
Seen or unseen, through many a day or night.

LIVELIHOOD

His help was of the hills, steadfast, serene
In their eternal strength, those shapes of
green
Sublimely moulded.

Whatsoever his skill,
No man had ever rightly drawn a hill
To his mind—never caught the subtle curves
Of sweeping moorland with its dips and swerves—
Nor ever painted heather . . .

Heather came
Always into his mind like sudden flame,
Blazing and streaming over stony braes
As he had seen it on that day of days
When he had plunged into a sea of bloom,
Blinded with colour, stifled with the fume
Of sun-soaked blossom, the hot heady scent
Of honey-breathing bells, and sunk content
Into a soft and scented bed to sleep;
And he had lain in slumber sweet and deep,
And only wakened when the full moon's light
Had turned that wavy sea of heather white:
And still he'd lain within the full moon blaze
Hour after hour, bewildered and adaze
As though enchanted—in a waking swoon
He'd lain within the full glare of the moon
Until she seemed to shine on him alone
In all the world—as though his body'd grown
Until it covered all the earth, and he
Was swaying like the moon-enchanted sea
Beneath that cold white witchery of light . . .
And now, the earth itself, he hung in night

MAKESHIFTS

Turning and turning in that cold white glare
For ever and for ever . . .

She was there—

There at his window now, the moon. The sleet
And wind no longer swept the quiet street.
And he was cold: the fire had burnt quite low:
And, while he'd dreamt, there'd been a fall of
snow

He wondered where that poor old man would
hide

His head to-night with thirst unsatisfied . . .

His thirst, who knows! but night may quench the
thirst

Day leaves unsatisfied . . .

Well, he must first

Get to his bed and sleep away the night,
If he would rise to see the hills still white
In the first glory of the morning light.

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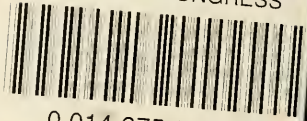
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